

## Presentation: Francis de Sales and Women

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It is well known that Francis de Sales (1567-1622), early seventeenth century Savoyard bishop of Geneva, noted spiritual writer and guide, had a flourishing ministry to women. His fabled spiritual friendship with Baroness Jane de Chantal (1572-1641), their foundation of a women's congregation, the Visitation of Holy Mary, as well as his voluminous correspondence with women seeking spiritual advice and his publication of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* addressed to "Philothea" (female lover of God), are all evidence of this focus of his pastoral attention. Less well known perhaps is the wider cultural and religious context in which this ministry emerged. Also underestimated is the extent to which the bishop's pastoral care of women was central to his wider spiritual, even eschatological, vision. This short presentation will attempt to situate de Sales' work with women in these wider and deeper contexts.

### The Quarrel about Women

In the last quarter of the sixteenth into the first half of the seventeenth century, a lively cultural debate came to the surface in France which had repercussions across Europe. The debate, known as *la querelle des femmes*, had philosophical, literary, and religious expressions and was concerned variously with the innate nature of the female sex, the intellectual and psychological capabilities of women (often viewed in contrast to supposed male capabilities), the need for better education of women, and the appropriate roles they should play in society and the realm of religion. The quarrel was not new (it had its roots in the Renaissance and countered Medieval assumptions about female inferiority) but took on intensity. Arguments

rode the incoming tides of new European intellectual currents were being felt in science, philosophy, and political theory. More and more women's capabilities were championed, educational opportunities emerged, and women began to be viewed, especially in France and surrounding regions, as influential social, literary and religious figures.

This time frame, of course, straddled not only Francis' lifetime but the tumultuous years in France and Europe during which ongoing Christian reform initiatives were dividing nations and communities along differing confessional lines. In France, this divisiveness took the form of what has become known as the Wars of Religion (1562-1598) at whose core was the eventual succession to the French throne of Henri of Navarre as Henri IV, the Protestant-raised heir to the kingship. Wars of Religion not only divided Catholic and Protestants (Huguenots) but Roman Catholics as well. Zealots of the Holy Catholic League inveighed against their more moderate co-religionists who accepted the accession of Henri IV to the throne. When the strife was concluded, those zealots, becoming the party of the *dévots*, turned their energies toward the total Christian transformation of society.

The result was an era of especially intense and often innovative efforts to promote the renewal and reform of the Catholic faith. This energy, which had been active well before the Council of Trent was augmented by the gradual introduction of Trent's tenets into French society. The result was the reform of both the episcopate and the clergy, the institution of new religious congregations, the renewal of older communities, circulation of classic and newly minted texts on the spiritual life, reform of preaching and pastoral practice, the spiritual instruction of laity and family, and the promotion of spiritual direction for those outside the cloister. In this context, widely circulating ideas about the capabilities of the female sex

dovetailed with the energies sparking reform. Indeed, the importance of women's participation in the success of the Catholic Reformation cannot be underestimated. Just as in Protestant households across Europe women played key roles in encouraging more intentional Christian commitment, so too did Catholic women, both lay and religious, find themselves eager to deepen faith and contribute in myriad ways to the ongoing renewal of Catholic culture. Roman Catholic women's participation took many forms: the establishment of new congregations by and for women, many engaged in female education and health care; active participation in ongoing religious debates; collaboration with clerical efforts for reform; and the hosting of spiritual salons which brought together the leading lights of French reform. Women within the world of Catholic reform began to be recognized as mediators of essential Christian values to all they encountered. Hence the pastoral care and instruction of the female sex in sound virtuous teaching was paramount. Their zeal harnessed could hasten social reform.

Catholic schooling for women proliferated. Instructors and founders brought to their efforts not only a new appreciation of the social value of female education but also retained traditionally ambivalent notions about women's intrinsic nature as well. These included assumptions about women's psychological weaknesses (emotionality, limited intellectual gifts, lack of moral fiber, vanity, the tendency to be easily led astray) as well as the physiological and social limitations stemming from pregnancy and childbirth, marital responsibilities, and subordinate relationship to spouses. Often it was assumed that due to these defects women must be placed under the headship of males.

At the same time that these traditional ideas threaded through Catholic pastoral practice, the notion of a "feminine paradox" was also operative. The paradox was one that had

biblical authority as it was claimed that power lay in weakness. The words of St. Paul echoed this sentiment: God chose those who were regarded as foolish by the world to shame the wise; God chose those in the world who were weak to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27). In the period under consideration women became prime examples of the lowly and weak who paradoxically excel at transgressive wisdom. Women, given their supposed natural sensibilities, could also be seen as especially capable of deep piety and sacred love as well as innately inclined toward devotion and charitable activity. They were the “devout” sex. To educate women and cultivate their capacities was one of the components of the Catholic reform.

#### Francis de Sales and Women

The world just described is easily recognizable as one in which de Sales’ particular preoccupation with women is illuminated. The eldest son of a landed Savoyard aristocrat, the young François quite early in his life was inspired by the energies of the reform animating much of Catholic Europe. After initial schooling among the Dominicans, young de Sales chose to attend the Jesuit *college* of Clermont in Paris because, we are told, the boy admired the reforming zeal of the Society of Jesus. In the company of his cousins and a tutor François was immersed in Clermont’s exacting humanist curriculum.

It was in Paris that what was to become the future bishop’s spiritual-theological vision began to take shape. Overcome with the exegesis of the *Song of Songs* presented by Benedictine scripture scholar Générard, Francis embraced fully an image of a God who, like a lover, passionately seeks and is sought by the beloved, the human person. What was becoming his mature vision was forged in an acute spiritual crisis over predestination he underwent in the French capital that was later theologically clarified when he continued his studies at the

University of Padua. At Padua, aware of the theological quarrels rending the Catholic world over grace and free will, he chose to align himself with the “middle knowledge” of Jesuit Luis de Molina. The upshot of this was that de Sales affirmed that God intends all humans to be saved and gives sufficient grace for that to occur but also endows humankind with free will to choose or not to respond to the divine initiative. It was also at Padua that he aligned himself with the Franciscan theological idea of the Primacy of Christ –that Christ and the Incarnation were at the center of God’s plan regardless of human sin.

What was becoming his mature vision may aptly be described as a “World of Hearts.” Drawing on the seventeenth century baroque aesthetic which made copious use of the heart image, in all his communications he crafted a word picture of an interconnected world of human and divine hearts. His understanding of heart was biblical: it was the core, the center of the person involving all capacities. For him, human hearts were created to beat in rhythm with their creator’s dynamic heart of love. Because they were created by God who is goodness itself, they too were essentially good and retained their original orientation to love. Yet as they were wounded by sin human hearts were, as it were, arrhythmic, and must be restored to their intended pulse by “living Jesus.” They do this through the mediation of the one fully human-fully divine heart that beats in perfect rhythm with the divine heart. The heart of Jesus must be exchanged for human hearts. The heart exchanged participated in the inner life of the Trinity itself. The entire person was to be transformed.

At the keystone of this optimistic vision was the invitation issued by Jesus in Matthew to “Come to me and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Matt 11:28-30), an invitation the Savoyard interpreted in an eschatological manner. This was the nature of the

divine heart itself, from which humans were to learn. The divine lover does not coerce, but woos, wins hearts. The deepest desire of the divine heart – the Kingdom come - was thus to have the created order love as was intended: to beat in rhythm with the heart of God.

To *Live Jésus!* was to enable one's heart to be transformed into the inner reality of the Trinitarian God revealed in the gentleness (*douceur*) and humility of the Son. As virtues are essentially habits of the heart that must be practiced, of especial importance in this enabling were the ordinary virtues like gentleness, humility, patience, simplicity and cordiality.

After graduation and ordination to the priesthood, the Savoyard was made co-adjutor to the bishop of Geneva and sent into the Chablais region to convert the Protestant population. Although François drew on a vast number of sources, his synthesis as it emerged had a decidedly Franciscan note, affirming the goodness and beauty that is imprinted on the created order and the communicative, relational nature of the Trinity, as well as the necessity for embracing the preference for the paradoxical virtues not esteemed by the "world." This predilection manifested itself fairly early in his ministry when he was sent into Calvinist territory to convert the population to the Catholic faith and developed an irenic style. His was intentionally an approach designed to contrast with the pastoral tactics adopted by the zealous party of the Catholic *dévots* which fomented *against* enemies and advocated violence. De Sales' irenic pastoral approach was born of his vision of a world of hearts and undergirded by his conviction that God intends all persons to be drawn back in love into union with Love itself.

Upon his predecessor's death he was ordained bishop. In his episcopal capacity de Sales carried on an extensive correspondence with any number of well born women, who had caught the enthusiasm for renewal surging through the church. The most obvious example is his

correspondence with Madame de Charmoisy, who consulted him about the difficulties of cultivating a devout Christian lifestyle at the court where her husband was assigned. In his letters de Sales guided her methodically through the initial phases of establishing a serious life of prayer and virtuous conduct adapted to the situation in which she found herself. With wise moderation he instructed her on the value of a life dedicated on God, preparation for such a commitment, various ways of raising the heart by means of prayer and the sacraments, the cultivation of virtues necessary for such a life, ways of avoiding temptations, and the frequent renewal of one's commitment.

The letters he wrote specifically to correspondents like Mme. de Charmoisy often contained inserted within them more general missives with spiritual advice that could be shared with friends. These became the basis for his first book, *Introduction to the Devout Life*. The spiritual vision he promoted was meant for all laity yet he did have a particular gift for guiding women by making abundant use of metaphors drawn from feminine experience such as pregnancy, birth, lactation, and child-rearing. Similarly, his letters to women are threaded through with references to ordinary family life. Underlying his pastoral advice to laity was the assumption that God intends all persons to be caught up in the loving divine embrace no matter the societal role, gender, or social status they hold. All "states of life" could be fertile ground for cultivating a devout life which he described as "a spiritual agility and liveliness by means of which charity realizes its actions in us, or we do so by charity, promptly and lovingly."

Women, as he took ecclesial office, more and more flocked to him requesting pastoral care. He seems to have appreciated women in part because they possessed the spiritual qualities he appreciated, although he also held what were fairly typical views of women's

particular shortcomings as well. Years later he was recalled by his friend Jean-Pierre Camus, Bishop of Belley as saying

This weaker sex is worthy of great compassion. That is why it is necessary to be more gentle than forceful. St. Bernard says that the care of souls is not for the strong but for the weak. Our Lord himself did not deny them his assistance. Several women generally followed him, and they did not abandon him at the cross, where he was abandoned by all the other disciples except St. John. The church gives to their sex the name “devout.”

In this wise Francis is revealed to have held the contemporary view of the “feminine paradox.” Frail and subject to certain weakness, women nonetheless had innate gifts – they were the “devout” sex that made them especially capable of deep love of God, a capacity to which the Gospels attest. At the same time, this female capacity for devotion the bishop believed was sometimes hindered by women’s weaknesses, the chief of which in his mind was vanity. His theory of beauty was operative here: if a woman saw herself as an end in herself, if she failed to perceive the more profound meaning of her existence, she would give herself up to vanity, adorning the outward self for its own sake. The corrective feminine spiritual task would be to adorn the inner self. The exterior then would reflect the true inner beauty being cultivated and become an evocation of the divine. To combat vanity women need not become ugly but should shift attention from the outer to the inner self.

Despite the widespread popularity of the *Introduction* and the bishop’s reputation as a sought-after preacher and spiritual guide, his noteworthy female ministry was not without its critics. For example, Camus reported that many of his contemporaries wondered why de Sales did not exert himself to found a men’s congregation that might better serve the church or employ his energies more profitably than to bother with persons who had to be taught over



and over in order to retain instruction. To these objections, Francis responded that he was not worthy of such exalted enterprises, demurring that “It is for goldsmiths to handle gold and silver and potters to handle clay.” He deflected all queries about a men’s community to the work of the “Servant of God, Bérulle,” whom he claimed had much more capacity for such a task, adding that one should “leave to the master craftsmen the grand designs.”

While his views of women reflect the common perspective of his era about the “lesser” status and capabilities of women, it would seem that there was a certain irony in de Sales’ humble rejoinders to the question of why he spent so much of his time on women. As suggested, this irony was perhaps more deeply embedded in the bishop’s ultimate eschatological vision than merely an expression of a pastoral imperative. It was in keeping with de Sales’ fundamental vision about the ultimate goal of all human life played out in the spiritual drama of the divine lover who constantly seeks and is sought by the beloved. Through the Word, he knew that persons are given insight into the very nature of the divinity. The *Song of Songs* depicted the love story of God and humankind and in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus revealed the divine heart to be gentle and humble. His style of communication – heart to heart – with its ample use of metaphor, story, vivid images drawn from ordinary life – was not simply a means of “simplifying” or popularizing his message. His style was also deeply embedded in his convictions about the nature of the divine manifested in the world of hearts.

The trend toward collaboration between the sexes so common in the reform circles in which he moved would bear fruit in his fabled friendship with Jane Frances Frémyot, baroness de Chantal. Friendship, especially spiritual friendship, was a key concept in the Salesian world of hearts since the alignment of the heart with the divine heartbeat took place over time not only

through prayer, the sacramental life, and inspirations but between persons whose hearts were breathing and beating with the divine rhythm. Thus the mutual sharing of devotion, charity and Christian perfection was at the heart of true friendship.

Within several years their shared friendship flowered and bore fruit in 1610 in the foundation of the women's congregation, the Visitation of Holy Mary. The modest diocesan community was an expression of both of their dreams. The new congregation would differ from other reformed communities in that it accepted women not eligible for those orders but widows like Jane, widows, the frail, the disabled. The Visitation was to adopt a very modest lifestyle and accept the inevitable inconveniences that such life involved, being content with resources locally available, refusing to accept entrants based on their ability to provide a dowry, or to ornament their living space superfluously.

Over the years the bishop had reflected on the scriptural mystery for which the community was named. As de Sales meditated on the Lucan story he perceived that this mystery was a summation of the entire Gospel. In his evocative fashion, he preached that the young virgin was "visited" by God in the figure of the angel Gabriel. God offered a "kiss" to humankind. Thus visited, and freely consenting, Mary was moved to visit her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. In the fulfillment of the most ordinary of human exchanges Love is passed on through loving human encounters. Heart to heart.

## Conclusion

François de Sales clearly had a special ministry to women. As suggested, his view of women was in part reflective of current cultural and religious ideas about women's capacities, and their roles. Drawing on scriptural precedent, the bishop accepted what in early modern

Catholic circles had become the common paradoxical view of women as the “weaker” and yet also the “devout” sex, truly capable of great love and dedication. His spiritual guidance of so many lay and religious women, his close friendship with Jane de Chantal, the foundation of the female congregation, the Visitation of Holy Mary, and his intimate knowledge of contemplative practices of that community, all attest to his firm conviction of women’s spiritual potential and depth and their significance in the re-Christianization of society.

On the one hand, his work with women can be seen as flowing from a sense of pastoral imperative. He and his fellow reformers were well aware that women, energized by the spiritual impulses fueling reform whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, were key evangelizers within their families and local communities. Thus the nurture and education of women was identified to be of pressing pastoral concern. In this de Sales shared the perspective of his contemporaries.

This was foregrounded by the ongoing wider European (but particularly French) debates about female capabilities and the emergence of women as prominent arbiters of social, literary, and religious happenings and esteemed models of Christian behavior. This growing appreciation of the capacities of the female sex dovetailed with the increased participation of women in the Catholic reform movement. Men in the movement collaborated with women in remarkable ways, co-founding communities, relying on them as spiritual guides and establishing close relationships based upon their shared spiritual enthusiasm. It is not surprising then that, given the reforming energy galvanizing during the period surrounding the turn of the seventeenth century, someone like de Sales, so dedicated to that reform, would be an active

participant. And since women had come to be seen as central in this re-Christianization, it is not surprising that he would make the female sex a priority.

At the same time, there is a consistency about his choice of women as his focus that is not simply pragmatic but which resonates with the bishop's larger theological and spiritual vision. That vision is radically counter-cultural. It turns accepted values upside down. Over and over, as one surveys the bishop's writings and attends to the testimony of his contemporaries, his preference for the little, the lowly, humility, and poverty stands out. As does his affirmation that divine love is diffusive, self-giving, and self-emptying and invites a reciprocal response from creatures, especially humankind, made in the divine image. Although Francis drew on a vast number of sources, his synthesis as it emerged had a decidedly Franciscan note, affirming the goodness and beauty that is imprinted on the created order and the communicative, relational nature of the Trinity, as well as the necessity for embracing the preference for the paradoxical lowly virtues not esteemed by the "world."

This predilection manifested itself fairly early in his ministry when he was sent into Calvinist territory to convert the population to the Catholic faith and developed an irenic style. And despite his status as an esteemed bishop in an age of baroque splendor, de Sales always had a personal and pastoral preference for the little and the lowly. His own episcopal living situation, in the simple apartments across from *Cathedral Saint Pierre* in Annecy, were modest. His lifestyle was simple, his personal habits abstemious, the tenor of his episcopal household modestly devout. Jane de Chantal in her deposition for his post-humous canonization, attested to this and to the fact that he never put himself forward but always desired to be seen as a lesser man than people imagined because "humility should make us indifferent to everything

that was not essential for our growth in grace. She likewise described how he impartially served the rich and the poor, enjoying the presence of anyone who sought him out, never looking down on anyone, even speaking *patois* to make country folk more comfortable with him.

Similarly, in a religious era in which heroic virtues and mortifications were in vogue, he foregrounded the ordinary, “little virtues.” Jane recounted how he guided the Vistandines, as he did all those he directed, in this choice of virtues, “He said we should be very faithful in the practice of little virtues and let no opportunity slip by; it was better to be great in God’s sight by being faithful to little things than small in his eyes by cultivating virtues which look grand to the world.” This preference for the ordinary little virtues aligned with his belief, forged from his youthful spiritual wrestling, that God intends all to be saved – green grocer, housewife, cloistered contemplative – and gives ample grace to all in a manner compatible with each one’s state in life. Ordinary virtues, being inclusive, could be practiced by all.

De Sales’ full vision of human transformation is readily captured throughout his sermons, correspondence, and in the *Introduction* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Through practices of prayer and self-reflection, the self-giving love of others, friendship, the alignment of the human and divine wills through the cultivation of the little ordinary virtues, the synchronization of the human heart to the rhythm of the divine heart gradually takes place. This was more than imitation of Christ, for the bishop conceived of the heart in biblical fashion, as the center of all human capacities: memory, understanding and will. The heart exchanged participated in the inner life of the Trinity itself. The entire person was to be transformed, to *Live Jesus!*

At the core of this predilection for paradox is Francis' preferred scriptural image of Jesus found in Matthew chapter 11:29: "Come to me and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart." It is striking that the invitation occurs within an eschatologically toned passage in which Jesus berates the towns in which he has performed miracles yet have not repented and warns them that they will reap sorrow on the Day of Judgement to come. Then comes this striking pronouncement which overturns the assumed order of the world:

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."  
(Matt 11:25-30)

De Sales' Trinitarian Christology, his assumption that the Son is one with the Father and thus reveals the nature of God's own self, is operative in here. As likewise is the Savoyard's conviction that this passage, along with the rhapsodic narrative of the *Song of Songs*, reveals the manner in which the divine/human love story plays out. Divine Love is gentle and relational, God woos and invites, respecting human freedom to respond or to turn away. Present too is the preference for the little and lowly as bearers of wisdom.

This was the vision of the kingdom Francis de Sales held. It should come as no surprise then that the Savoyard, with his preference for the little and the lowly, his firm belief that God's own nature is self-diffusive, pouring itself in love and manifesting that love in lowliness,

littleness, poverty, hiddenness, ordinariness, and the divine self-gift of love expressed in the Incarnation and on the cross, would choose as witnesses to this mystery those seen in society as least and lesser. Women, especially widows, handicapped, and frail women - the women of the Visitation - would witness to the world of this truth and fulfill the Pauline dictum, "God chose those who were regarded as foolish by the world to shame the wise; God chose those in the world who were weak to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27).