

Topic 17: Salesian Spirituality, Part 1

Overview: St. Francis de Sales (1567–1622) and St. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572–1641) ushered a gentleness, kindness, and compassion into seventeenth-century France. The impulse that they both shared towards a focus on love was extraordinary in that many of their contemporaries had Jansenistic leanings towards a more severe and rigid spirituality. We also see an important dynamic in their relationship that brings together the masculine and feminine. I would propose that this was one of the variables that helped them focus on a God who was loving and forgiving since it reflected the quality of their relationship. The fact that they were very different in background and temperament also accounts for a blending and balancing in their vision of the world and their images of God that we find in their writings.

St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane Frances de Chantal

- During Francis and Jane’s lifetimes, there was a strong Jansenistic thrust in French culture.
- Their impulse foreshadowed some of the themes of Vatican II.
- Both had intense personal experiences that colored the way they viewed the world and spirituality.

1) When Francis was at college in Paris, he was “tried by a state of extreme mental anguish, firmly believing that he was doomed to go to Hell and had no hope of salvation. This made him go cold with fear. However terrible his state of mind, he held fast in the depths of his soul to his resolution to love and serve God with his whole strength while his life lasted, and all the more lovingly and faithfully in this life, as he thought he would have no chance of doing it in the next...”

(a) Through prayer and divine intervention, Francis moved beyond this intense period of darkness and recognized a merciful and loving God. This experience is a lens from which we can look at what he writes and says.

(b) Jane’s husband was unfaithful to her and had a child with another woman. It seems that she was able to work through her anger and disappointment, moving towards internal forgiveness and reconciliation. He died after a hunting accident. She had to navigate her feelings towards the man who shot her husband. Going through these experiences made her a more loving and compassionate person.

- Together, they founded the Order of the Visitation, which exists to this day. Several other communities have been inspired by the teachings of St. Francis de Sales.

The Lives of St. Francis (1567–1622) and St. Jane (1572–1641)

- Francis and Jane shared a common vision for the spiritual life.
- Francis was university educated in law, theology, philosophy, and rhetoric. He was a man of the world, engaged in public life as a bishop of a diocese, spiritual director, writer, preacher, correspondent with people in all walks of life, and advocate of lay devotion
- Jane was a baroness, wife, mother, widow, foundress, and religious superior. Her world was monastic and feminine.
- Salesian spirituality is embodied in these two people. Francis was educated by Jesuits. They built upon Ignatian spirituality. Nonetheless, there is a marked difference in their approach.

Salesian Spirituality

- Jane’s writings primarily took the form of conferences and letters to her nuns.
- The overall motto of Salesian spirituality is “Live Jesus!” The motto reflects goal of making the gentle and humble Jesus live in the hearts of humankind.

Francis’ best known works are his Introduction to the *Devout Life and his Treatise on the Love of God*. In the Introduction, Francis states the uniqueness of his spirituality: “Almost all those who have hitherto written about devotion have been concerned with instructing persons wholly withdraw from the world...My purpose is to instruct those who live in town, within families, or at court, and by their state of life are obliged to live an ordinary life as to outward appearances.”

(a) Francis builds on the notion of going out into the world, but focuses on ordinary people.

(b) The insight that everyone is called to holiness begins with Francis de Sales.

- The original plan was that the Visitation nuns would be unenclosed but Francis yielded to the wishes of the Archbishop of Lyons and made them cloistered. This reflects the beginnings of the impulse that women can be out in the world.
- The Salesian world is a world of the heart.

- 1) The Salesian Christology can be summarized by Matthew 11:29.
- 2) Francis and Jane are aware that human nature is wounded by sin, but emphasized that the healing of the human heart comes from receiving God's love.

Review Questions

1. St. Francis de Sales models gentleness for us. We live in a culture that is anything but gentle. Try to slow down, pay attention to the people around you, and practice gentleness for a few days.
2. Francis and Jane wrote "Live Jesus" on all of their correspondence. Let those two words sink into psyche and repeat it every time you remember to do so throughout the course of one day.
3. Salesian spirituality calls everyone to holiness through the way of the heart. His thinking made its way into the Second Vatican Council. Think about holiness, what it means to you, and how you are called to sanctity.