



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Living the Mystery of the Visitation: The Early Visitandines as Educators

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The Beginnings of Visitandine *Pensionnats* (Boarding Schools)

People familiar with the Visitation order would not generally regard the early Visitandines (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) as educators but primarily as cloistered nuns leading a contemplative life. So the title and subject of this working paper might appear to be a bit puzzling to them. However, there is abundant evidence that the Visitandines during the century of their founding and the following century played a key role in education and were highly regarded and greatly esteemed as outstanding educators of girls and young women. In fact, one author goes so far as to write that the teaching of young girls was the principal mission of the Visitandines.¹ How can we account for this statement that one of the principal aims of the Visitation is the education of young girls except for the fact that most of the monasteries had *pensionnats* and an excellent reputation. Hence this author concluded that one of the principal aims of the Visitation was education. So they were known not strictly as a cloistered order, at least in Rennes, but also as a teaching order.

It seems that the real beginnings of the *pensionnat* in the Visitation monasteries very likely occurred after it was formally made into an order with solemn vows. The pressure for the Visitandines to take in young girls was part of a current that swept across most of the women's monastic orders for educating young girls. Ignorance of the Catholic faith on the part of the laity was regarded as one of the main reasons why the Protestant Reformation was able to make such great inroads. The education of girls and young women was seen as a healthy antidote to the

¹ "Saint François de Sales et sainte Jeanne Frémiot de Chantal fondèrent les religieuses de la Visitation en 1610. Un des principaux buts de cette congrégation est l'éducation des jeunes filles." L'abbé Guillotin de Corson, *Pouillé Historique de l'Archevêché de Rennes* (Paris: René Haton, Librairie-Éditeur, 1882), 3:242.

success of the Protestant Reform movement and did in fact play a significant role in the Catholic Reform.

The Visitation order was particularly attractive to parents because of the reputation of both Francis and Jane and especially because of the tremendous popularity of the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, which, as we will see, contributed mightily to the pedagogical content and approach of their boarding schools. One author attributes the popularity of this work as the major reason for the Visitandines becoming highly regarded educators of young girls and women: “The enthusiasm with which the book of the *Introduction to a Devout Life* was received, an enthusiasm which became greater with each passing day, so much so that it was translated in all the languages, put into French verse, and which, according the expression of Bishop Camus, was the breviary of people in the world, this enthusiasm, I say, for the ideas, the very holy and lovable maxims of the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, this is what created, despite Francis de Sales himself, the *pensionnats* of the Visitation.”²

Initially both Francis and Jane were against boarding schools because they saw them as a distraction that would interfere with the contemplative life.³ But eventually, they both saw the advantages of having young girls who were contemplating a religious vocation to be educated by the nuns. So initially, the purpose for accepting young girls around the age of twelve was to foster and strengthen vocations to the religious life and particularly for the Visitation.

This can be clearly seen in Francis’s letter of 16 May 1620 to Mother Châtel, Superior of the Grenoble Visitation. In this letter, he instructs her to accept the young aspirant when she is twelve and comments about the disadvantage of accepting boarding students: “It is true that these young people cause difficulties, but what can one do? In this world there is no mixed blessing....There is no wine without sediment. We need to have balance: isn’t it better that in our garden we have thorns so as to have roses rather than not having roses so as not to have thorns?” In addition to upsetting the interior quiet of the monastery, Francis also realized the dangers of requiring young children to perform the religious exercises of the nuns because this might easily turn them against devotion. “Now if you receive the one you spoke about, it is true that you should not bound her to the religious exercises for this might turn her off at such a tender age when ordinarily she cannot yet appreciate spiritual things.”⁴ In this letter, he advises her to have a specific habit for this young girl, which was not to be the same as that of the nuns. We would likely call it today a uniform.

St. Vincent de Paul also saw the danger of taking young girls into convent boarding schools and writes to one of the Vincentian superiors who was contemplating doing the same thing with young boys: “The houses of the Visitation nuns often have a similar experience. They take little girls as boarders and, raising them in the spirit of the religious Order, give the habit to those who ask for it, when they are sixteen years old. But, almost all of those girls, who take it in this way

² Emile. Bougaud, *Histoire de Sainte Chantal et des Origines de la Visitation*, 6e ed. (Paris: Poussielgue Frère, 1869),2:355.

³ “il faut tout a fait eviter de recevoir des autres filles avant l'aage, car Dieu n'a pas esleu vostre Institut pour l'education des petites filles, ains pour la perfection des femmes et filles qui, en aage de pouvoir discerner ce qu'elles font, y sont appellees.” François de Sales, *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, Edition Complète, 27 vols. (Annecy: J. Niérat et al., 1892-1964), 19:201. Hereafter OEA. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ OEA, 19:201.

subsequently lead a lax, lazy life because they do not have a true vocation since they were put there by their relatives and remained there out of human respect.”⁵

In order to minimize the disadvantage of having boarders, Francis specified that there should be a small number of them, from good families and who show an aptitude for living virtuous lives. It should be noted that in the first two Rules, the Visitandines did have a teaching function if only a very limited one. They could take in no more than three girls around the age of twelve as boarders following the advice of Francis and on Sundays and feast days also instruct the girls and women of the town in spiritual exercises.⁶ The editor notes in the *Oeuvres* that these two articles were dropped in the definitive edition of the Rule and that the section dealing with the instruction of young girls was incorporated into the *Coutumier* (Custom Book).

In one of her letters, St. Jane mentions “*le directoire des jeunes filles.*” The editor notes that this is what is contained in chapter five of the *Coutumier*, namely, essentially the brief sentence about teaching young girls as contained in the two first editions of the Rule. However, all of the other directories of the Visitandines are very detailed, mentioning the specific duties and also the attitude or disposition that the nun with these duties should have. This statement on the teaching of young girls only mentions their age, disposition and their intention or that of the parents to become religious. It says nothing about those who are to teach them, which is odd for a directory. So I conclude that there must have been initially a directory for those who taught these young girls, one specifying their duties and their disposition in performing them.⁷

An examination of Jane’s correspondence indicates over the years a gradual loosening of the limitations on the number of boarders the various monasteries could take in. In one letter, Jane tells the Mother Superior to grant to a certain woman what she needs for teaching young girls if there are no Ursulines in the city where the Visitandines are established.⁸ The sisters still did teach women how to perform exercises of piety whenever it did not cause an affront to the

⁵ St. Vincent de Paul: *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, trans. Sr. Marie Poole, D.C. and Rev. Francis Germovnik, C.M. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New York City Press, 1994), 564. The letter is dated 1656.

⁶ ARTICLE 24: DES JEUNES FILLES: *On ne pourra recevoir des jeunes filles en la mayson qu'elles n'ayent au moins dix ou douze ans, et n'en pourra-on recevoir que troys a la foys, et de celles qui ont quelqu'inclination, ou au moins auxquelles les parens desirent qu'on donne inclination d'estre Religieuses*” (OEA, 25: 254). ARTICLE 25 (art 36 ms M): DES ENSEIGNEMENS POUR LES SECULIERES : *Quand il plaira a Nostre Seigneur que les Seurs ayent un lieu propre, elles s'essayeront d'attirer, les festes et Dimanches, les filles et femmes de la ville au lieu preparé a cela, et qui ne sera pas dedans [le cours des] chambres et offices des Seurs, affin de les enseigner des exercices de pieté : comme de l'examen de conscience, de la praeparation du matin, de la façon de dire le chapelet et la couronne, de se confesser et communier, et de bien faire l'orayson vocale*” (OEA, 25:255). DES ENSEIGNEMENS POUR LES SECULIERS ARTICLE 22: “*Les Seurs s'essayeront es festes et Dimanches d'attirer les filles et femmes de la ville au lieu preparé pour cela, affin de leur enseigner familièrement [practical and down-to-earth both in language and in content] les exercices de pieté : comme de l'examen de conscience, de la preparation du matin, de bien dire le Chapelet et la Couronne et de bien prier Dieu, pourveu que cela se face hors de l'heure du Catechisme et du sermon. Et pour cet office, la Superieure nommera au commencement de l'annee quelqu'une des Seurs qu'elle jugera propre pour cela ; lesquelles exerceront cette charge avec humilité, simplicité et modestie, enseignant d'abord a celles qui leur viendront parler, de n'apporter point les nouvelles de la ville et autres telz entretiens inutiles*” (OEA, 25: 381-82). Although this article was dropped from the definitive edition of the Constitutions, Jane relied on it when it served her purposes.

⁷ See *Correspondance Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot de Chantal* ; édition critique établie et annotée par Marie-Patricia Burns, 6 vols (Paris : Cerf : Centre d'études franco-italien, 1986-1987), 2: 423, 425. Hereafter *Correspondance*.

⁸ *Correspondance*, 2:634

Ursulines. However, at this point, Jane was still not in favor of accepting boarding students who were not aspiring to the religious life.

Jane points out that the fourth article for founding a proposed monastery at Condrieu allowing for the instruction of young girls is contrary to the Institute's mission. The monastery can only accept no more than three between ages of ten and twelve. However, she advises the Mother Superior to propose to the founder a compromise, viz., to instruct them and some of their friends on feast days or even once a week in one of the parlors.⁹

As the pressure mounts, Jane becomes a little more open to more than three *pensionnaires* depending on whose doing the asking. To a bishop, she graciously responds that regarding the accepting of young girls as boarders, they will follow his advice, but she expresses the desire that the number not be too large and that they not be too young and "incapable of receiving instruction in piety and a good education."¹⁰ Jane holds the line in a request transmitted by Fr. Etienne Binet, SJ, but compromises by having the young girls taught in the parlor but in small numbers.¹¹ She gives approval to the Mother Superior of Nice to teach young girls in a special parlor because of the support the city gave them as they did the Ursulines. They were to be instructed in piety. She writes: "We should wholeheartedly render this service to these good people who greatly desire it. Let us hope that Our Lord will draw from it his glory, the good of these little souls in whom we will soon try to profoundly plant the fear of God, devotion to the Blessed Virgin, St. Joseph and their guardian angels."¹²

In 1641, she left it to the discretion of the superior of another monastery to determine the number of boarders to accept.¹³ So we can infer from this that the boarding schools of the Visitandines began to take off in number and size after this date so much so that practically all of the monasteries had a *pensionnat*. However, Jane was careful to advise against increasing the number simply to increase the doweries. She expresses this in a play on words that is difficult to translate in English.¹⁴ "From the 1730s, as Roger Devos has pointed out, the number of boarding students throughout Europe, and even in Italy increased to an extraordinary degree." Due to pressure from families and with the concurrence of other teaching orders, the regulations for admission changed so as to allow for young women who intended to marry.¹⁵

Teaching Methods and Classroom Management

As the number of *pensionnats* and *pensionnaires* increased, the teaching methods and strategies had to be adapted to the larger number of students. Although this writer was not able to consult

⁹ See *Correspondance*, 4:354. (Letter dated 1629).

¹⁰ *Correspondance*, 4: 531 (Letter dated 1638).

¹¹ See *Correspondance*, 5:808-09.

¹² *Correspondance.*, 6: 173-74.

¹³ *Correspondance.*, 6:367

¹⁴ "Ne cherchez pas les dots, disait telle sans cesse, cherchez les vocations. Qui veut avoir des filles d'argent, n'en aura jamais d'or." Bougaud, 2:430.

¹⁵ Stefania Nanni, "La Visitation et la sensibilité religieuse italienne des XVIIe et XVIII siècles, in *Visitation et Visitandines aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2001), 503.

precise documents regarding the situation in the Visitation convent schools, it is generally admitted that there was a good deal of intercommunication among the various teaching religious orders of women and that they adopted similar approaches because “there is abundant evidence that the congregations drew upon each other’s experiences in designing and establishing the school rules.”¹⁶ This also extended to pedagogy and curriculum. So it is not unreasonable to assume that the Visitandines in their boarding schools also had a lot in common with those congregations like the Ursulines who taught in their free schools. The most notable difference would be the spirit underlining the pedagogy and perhaps the conception of the role women had in the Church.

One specific example of this intercommunication is the fact that both Francis and Jane were familiar with the Rule of the Ursulines after the latter were required to become an order and observe strict enclosure even though their primary mission was to educate poor girls because the Visitation was facing a similar situation at the behest of Cardinal Marquemont, Archbishop of Lyons, viz., to become a religious order with solemn vows and strict enclosure.¹⁷ Furthermore, Francis was instrumental in establishing an Ursuline pensionnat in his diocese because he greatly admired them as religious and teachers.¹⁸ He would hardly stick his neck out if he were not well-acquainted with their pedagogical spirit and approach.

The teaching methods and classroom management were modeled after and adapted from the Jesuit schools, and their community life provided “a permanent structure within which to maintain and develop that pedagogy.”¹⁹ It was not the extensive academic subjects but the Society’s educational methods in discipline and pedagogy that were adapted. Since the numbers were very large, the teachers had to devise a way to break them up into smaller groups that would be educationally effective, and this was done according to the level of their ability and knowledge. When the student-teacher ratio was high, they used the method known as the *décurie*, that is dividing up the students in groups of ten with each having a student known as the

¹⁶ Elizabeth Rapely, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990), 152. Hereafter *Dévotes*.

¹⁷ See OEA, 17:424. It is interesting to note that Francis, although willingly acceding to the Cardinal’s request, wanted some wiggle room of how the cloister would function for the Visitandines. In a letter to Cardinal Bellarmine, Francis asks him to intercede on his behalf so that the Holy See in granting approval of the Visitation to become a religious institute with solemn vows and cloister to allow widows desiring to enter the religious life to live in the monasteries to protect their chastity. He makes the argument that allowing widows to live in the cloister and following the religious exercises of the nuns is no more harmful to the cloistered life than having young girls educated in boarding schools of cloistered nuns as was the case in so many of them. (See OEA, 17:244). Now this seems to run contrary to Francis’ initial feeling of the incompatibility of having young girls educated in a cloistered environment. He writes to the superior of the Nevers Visitation: “You must avoid accepting other girls before the [appropriate] age, for God has not chosen your institute for the education of very young girls.” (OEA, 19:375, see also OEA, 20:35). This letter written in 1620, i.e., after the Visitation became a religious order, seems to go against the reasoning he used in the above referenced letter. However, the reason Francis gives to Bellarmine helps to explain why having boarding schools was not contrary to the essential mission of the *Filles de Sainte-Marie* as the Visitandines were first called but in effect helped them to live the mystery of the visitation in a way that both founders had not initially envisioned. His main objection seems to be not to accept them at too tender an age when they are really not prepared for formal classroom teaching but in need of motherly care and affection. This position is supported in a letter where he points out some of the pitfalls of convent education, viz., that when it is done too early or not correctly, it can have adverse effects to the extent that they later reject the faith. (See OEA, 20:357).

¹⁸ See OEA, 15:302-03.

¹⁹ *Dévotes*, 147.

dizainière or *décurionne*, who had the responsibility for assisting the others with the lessons and also for maintaining discipline.²⁰

The so-called “emulation” method was used for awarding academic honors and prizes. It involved pairing off the students two by two and having them compete with each other. The two students, whose level of knowledge were closely matched, would be assigned as a pair and “listen to each other’s reading, correct each other, and compete in their prayers, catechism and lessons.”²¹ This is one of the strategies for adapting teaching to various learning styles, a principle that one author points out as implicit in Salesian pedagogy.²²

Classroom Discipline

With regard to classroom discipline, there was no beating of students. This was quite an innovation since in most of the classrooms of the day there were frequent beatings. The teachers of the girls’ *pensionnats* were taught how to control their anger and never to verbally abuse the students. “Feminine school rules, imitations of their masculine counterparts in so many ways, display one original characteristic: they treated their children as sensitive beings, open to damage. ... This helped to make the schoolroom much more benign, less violent. ‘Their teaching is marked with exactitude and gentleness,’ wrote an admirer. ‘They can be understood by the youngest and the oldest alike.’”²³ It is precisely in this gentle approach that the Visitandines excelled and for which they were greatly admired because their entire formation as nuns was imbued with the spirit of their institute, viz., gentleness and humility. These two virtues were their basic approach to “winning the hearts” of their students. Writing to one of the Visitation superiors regarding the proper approach for governing her community, Jane advises: “The more solicitous, open, and supportive you are of them, the more you will win their hearts.”²⁴ The Visitandines carried over this approach of “winning the hearts” to their classrooms.

The French word *éducation*” is much more extensive than the English cognate; it means upbringing that goes beyond mere classroom instruction. Francis closely aligns education with maternal love or giving nourishment. One of his letters to Mother Blonay is very instructive on the way he envisioned education as nourishment or a nourishing function:

²⁰ *Dévotes*, 149.

²¹ *Dévotes*, 149.

²² “François de Sales demande que l’on soit attentive à l’indispensable variété et diversité qui existe entre les êtres: ‘Si quelqu’un s’enquerait pourquoi Dieu a fait les melons plus gros que les fraises, ou les lys plus grands que les violettes, pourquoi le romarin n’est pas une rose, ou pourquoi l’oeillet n’est pas un souci, pourquoi le paon est plus beau qu’une chauve-souris, ou pourquoi la figue est douce et le citron aigrelet, on se moquerait de ses demandes et on lui dirait: pauvre homme, puisque la beauté du monde requiert la variété.... nous voyons qu’il ne se trouve jamais deux hommes parfaitement semblables ès dons naturels’” ([OEA, 4:110-111]; Bk. 2 chp. 7), Phillippe Le Gros, *François de Sales, Un maître en pédagogie* (Paris: Éditions Don Bosco, 2005),172.

²³ *Dévotes*, 150-51

²⁴ *Sa vie et ses oeuvres*, VIII, *Lettres* 5, 557 as cited by Wendy Wright, “‘That Is What It Is Made For’: The Image of the Heart in the Spirituality of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal,” in *Spiritualities of the Heart*, ed. Annice Callahan (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 152-53.”

God will suggest, my dear daughter, everything that he desires of you, if in the innocence and simplicity of your heart, with a complete resignation of your inclinations, you ask him often in your heart: ‘Lord, what do you want me to do [Acts 9,6]? And I am consoled that you have already heard his voice and that you will serve him in nourishing these young women.

It is not a good excuse to say: I have ‘no breasts’ [Cant. 8,8]; I have no milk for it is not with our milk or with our breasts that we nourish the children of God, but with the milk and breasts of the divine Spouse. We need do nothing other than show them to the children and say to them: Take, suck, draw and live. Have your heart thus open and expansive in order to perform all the service that is imposed on you. (OEA, 17:106, c. December 1615)

Although this advice was given to a Mistress of Novices for educating novices, the principles he enunciates here are certainly applicable to all teaching situations, viz., you make it as attractive as a mother’s milk is to an infant and this will naturally draw the child to be nourished by it. Furthermore, you should not be concerned, as I’m sure many of the early Visitandine educators were, about whether you have the necessary resources as long as you are doing it through obedience and out of love for the Lord.

Another insight into the saint’s pedagogy that must have certainly imbued the teaching of the early Visitandines is his 14 October 1604 letter to Jane advising her on how to raise (educate) her children. She is to use “gentle encouragement”²⁵ and act on them as the angels do. In this very same paragraph, he recommends that Françoise, who had a strong inclination to vanity, be educated in the monastery of Puits d’Orbe, which he was helping to reform. Now Françoise was only five years old at the time. So we can conclude from this advice that he saw an important role in the education of very young girls not only that of the mother, but also of a convent school. Furthermore, to make this recommendation, he had to be familiar with the teaching methods and curriculum of this Benedictine *pensionnat*. This recommendation is a bit surprising in view of what he wrote regarding convent boarding schools on other occasions.

The Curriculum

Not surprisingly, the curriculum was inevitably shaped by the culture of the period with regard to the role of women in the society of that day. This was succinctly stated by l’Abbé Fleury, a collaborator of Fénelon in writing the *Traité du choix et de la méthode des études*: “No doubt, it would be a great paradox that women are to learn other things beside their catechism, sewing and different kinds of skills, like singing, dancing, how to dress fashionably and curtsy properly. There you have ordinarily all of their education.”²⁶

²⁵ OEA, 12: 360-61. The expression he uses is “*inspirations soeüives*” which E. Stopp translates as “gentle encouragement.” *St. Francis de Sales: Selected Letters*, trans. by Elizabeth Stopp (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 69.

²⁶ This quote appears in ch. 38 of the *Traité du choix et de la méthode des études* as cited by Gabriel Compayré in *Histoire de la pédagogie*, 29ed. (Paris: Malottée,), 177.

Women were relegated essentially to the two roles of mother and religious, and it was for these two roles that the *pensionnats* prepared them with a good deal of overlap. The teaching orders had a very high regard for the importance of the education of future mothers which was expressed by a saying attributed to the Ursulines: “Young girls will reform their families, their families will reform their provinces, their provinces will reform the world.”²⁷ Along the same line, “in the course of his stay in Paris in 1619, Francis de Sales met Adrien Bourdoise, a priest working to reform the clergy, who strongly criticized him for spending too much time on women. The bishop calmly replied that women were at least half of the human race and that by forming good Christians there would be good children and with good children there would be good priests.”²⁸

One of the fundamental pedagogical principles which guided the nun teachers in the convent schools was that understanding comes before learning and advancing – “*Faire comprendre avant d’apprendre*” – to make a subject understood before it is learned – the principle was central to the *ratio studiorum* [of the Jesuit schools]. In close imitation, the women designed a course of studies, which demanded that the student fully complete one stage before advancing to the next”²⁹

The subjects that were taught in order of importance were the catechism, reading, handwork, writing and arithmetic. Initially, the catechism was that of Cardinal Bellarmine, which was approved by the Council of Trent. It was in two forms, one for the teacher (*Dichiarazione più Copiosa della Dottrina Cristiana* [1598]) and one for the students (“*Dottrina Cristiana Breve*” [1597]).³⁰ “The Ursulines were among the first to use the Bellarmine catechism, which was specifically designed for children. However, they later drew up their own catechism, so as to avoid as much as possible, material considered unsuitable for girls – in other words, the sixth commandment”³¹

The reading in community and the teaching of the catechism played an important role in the formation of the Visitandines and in their teaching. St. Jane mentions that the catechism was read four times a week.³² Although this writer is not sure which catechism, it very likely was the one for teachers. Moreover, the nuns taught the catechism on Sundays and feast days in their parlors to the young girls and women of the area. There is a fragment of a catechism written by Francis while in the Chablais in which he utilized his younger brother Bernard, who was thirteen at the time, as his respondent. Francis used a dialogue method for this catechism as was the custom then.³³

Closely related to explaining and having the students learn the catechism was the teaching of piety or devotion. A greater part of the day was spent teaching the students good behavior, the

²⁷ Cited in *Dévotes*, 157.

²⁸ Morand Wirth, *François de Sales et l’éducation* (Paris: Éditions Don Bosco, 2005), 281 referencing *E. Lajeunie, Saint François de Sales, l’homme, la pensée, l’action* (Paris, Guy Victor, 1966), 2:429.

²⁹ *Dévotes*, 151.

³⁰ It was translated into French for the first time from the Italian by Fr. Pericard Paris in 1600 under the title, *Catéchisme et ample declaration de la doctrine chrestienne*, Paris, 1600. (See OEA, 23: 265).

³¹ *Dévotes*, 156.

³² *Correspondance*, 1:203.

³³ OEA 23:12.

virtues, civility and good manners, which was known as the “*bonne société*,” or the social graces.³⁴ The Visitandines excelled in this area because of their specific formation in the social graces bolstered by the virtues of humility and gentleness, the essential spirit of their institute. We would call this character formation today, and it was seen as essential not only for future religious, but also for motherhood.

This character formation was grounded in daily religious exercises that in some ways closely resembled the practices of the religious life. “There were prayers for getting up in the morning, for carrying out the mundane duties of the day, for undressing at night, and finally for going to sleep. According to one school manual, the moment of climbing into bed was to be given over to the following meditation: ‘Alas! This is how one day, in the same manner, my body will be put into the tomb to be eaten by worms. Oh my God, how stupid man is to work only for his body, which will soon be reduced to dust, and to neglect his soul which is immortal’”³⁵ These practices closely resemble those prescribed by the Spiritual Directory of the Visitandines. Bougaud notes a manual used in the Visitandine pensionnats with the title, “*Exercices spirituels selon l’esprit de saint François de Sales pour les pensionnaires de son ordre*.”³⁶

The Virtues of Chastity and Modesty or *Pudeur*

The manner in which the nuns themselves were taught the virtue of chastity and that of *pudeur* or modesty no doubt profoundly influenced the way they tried to inculcate this in their charges. The vow of chastity not only included the avoidance of impurity, but also denying oneself even legitimate bodily pleasures. “Under this expanded definition of chastity a whole set of behaviors became implicated: modesty in dress and bearing, a physical reserve to the point of never touching a person unnecessarily, control of one’s tongue, moderation in eating, avoidance of profane books ‘and the use of all other things that can give pleasure to the senses.’”³⁷

The basic approach was to try to ward off in the cloister any of the worldly influences that would bring on temptations to impurity. The belief was that this approach could maintain baptismal innocence. The rules appeared to be shaped by the notion of baptismal innocence rather than around inborn concupiscence. “Their premise was that as long as the gates of the senses were guarded from the recurring temptations of daily life, serious problems of impurity could be avoided....Women of good family carefully raised and properly cloistered were not believed capable of such outrageously erotic behavior [as in Loudon, Louviers, etc.]. The only conclusion could be that they were demonically possessed.”³⁸

³⁴ *Dévotes*, 157.

³⁵ As contained in *Conduite chrétienne ou Formulaire de prières à l’usage des pensionnaires des religieuses Ursulines* (1734), quoted in Sonnet, *L’éducation des filles*, 167 and cited in Elizabeth Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Living in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens’ University Press, 2001), 239.

³⁶ Bougaud, 2:369. Unfortunately, I was not able to consult this document which would certainly be a window into how the Visitandines taught piety.

³⁷ Rapley, *Social History*, 136.

³⁸ Rapley, *Social History*, 138.

Starting from this too idealistic premise regarding baptismal innocence, the virtue of chastity was taught, unfortunately, indirectly. The teachers did not want “to offend pious ears,” as the saying goes. To be explicit about impurity they viewed as endangering the tender souls of their students and would not even as much as mention the word “marriage” to them. How strange an approach, especially when one considers that the main purpose of their education was to prepare them for motherhood. They did, however, speak very directly regarding the occasions of sin in the area of chastity. This approach, evidently, was prevalent in the nineteenth century in the education of young girls. An edition of the *Introduction à la vie dévote* for use in the schools deletes the chapters on chastity and some on temptations in which the saint becomes more explicit on the matters of sins against chastity than people of that era were comfortable dealing with, especially in a classroom setting.³⁹ However, it is difficult to fathom why the chapter on “Propriety in Dress” would be considered dangerous or offensive, except, perhaps for the statement: “More freedom in the way of ornament is allowed to young women, since they can lawfully desire to appear pleasing to others although there must be no intention except that of holy marriage.”⁴⁰

This author does not know whether this unhealthy prudishness prevailed in the Visitandine *pensionnats* of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. We do know that Francis was influenced by St. Jerome in treating sexual matters. Although, he treats this subject in the *Philothea* in an indirect manner, even this approach appeared to be too graphic for classroom use with very young girls.⁴¹ This is rather puzzling when one considers how delicately, yet perceptively he wrote of these matters in which clarity, understanding and proper motivation are absolutely essential for inculcating the virtue of chastity and *pudeur*.

The word “*pudeur*” was much more extensive in those days and went beyond modesty in matters sexual. “It represented the feminine identity as it was perceived in the seventeenth century, in all its weakness and limitation. Thus Fénelon could write: ‘in their sex there ought to be a *pudeur* towards knowledge, almost as delicate as that which inspires the horror of vice,’ and Madame de Maintenon could tell her students: ‘it befits the modesty of a girl or a woman to appear ignorant of things, even when she knows them.’ To seek learning for its own sake was unfeminine, and dangerous.”⁴² Jane de Chantal appears to subscribe to this view when commenting on those nuns who wish to know more than is in the catechism.⁴³ However, Francis de Sales’ teaching in the

³⁹ *Introduction à la vie dévote : à l'usage des maisons d'éducation du bienheureux François de Sales* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1894). This edition strangely omits in Part 3, the two chapters on chastity, the one on flirtations (ch. 17) as well as those on advice on evil friendships (ch. 21), propriety in dress, advice for married people, the sanctity of the marriage bed, instruction for widows, and the one on virgins.

⁴⁰ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, trans. J.K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 180.

⁴¹ “Le modèle hiéronymien lui permette d’aborder les thèmes liés au comportement ascétique de façon originale. Obligé à taire le problème, qu’il sait très réel, du danger de refoulement sexuel que présente toute vie monacale, ou tout simplement consacrée, il aborde le sujet de biais, en renvoyant ses correspondantes aux nombreux textes où Jérôme traite la question avec une franchise parfois brutale, préférant, comme il dit, ‘compromettre un peu la pudeur, plutôt que la cause défendue’ [See Epist. LIV, ad Furiam, no.10]” Viviane MELLINGHOFF-BOURGERIE, “La Tradition épistolaire de Jean d’Avila et de Saint Jérôme dans les lettres de François de Sales,” in *L’Univers salésienne: Saint François de Sales hier et aujourd’hui, actes du colloque international de Metz 12-19 septembre 1992* [Paris: Champion-Slatkine, 1994], 30.

⁴² *Dévotes*, 158.

⁴³ “Il est vrai, ma chère fille, nous lisons quatre fois la semaine le catéchisme à nos soeurs. Que si quelqu’une voulait savoir autre chose que ce qui est dans le livre, j’arrêteraï son esprit, désirant qu’elle et moi assujettissions nos

Philothea is more carefully nuanced: “For my part, just as I would not parade knowledge even of what I actually know, so contrariwise I would not pretend to be ignorant of it.”⁴⁴ It is very likely that the early Visitandine educators were influenced by the prevailing notion of *pudeur* with regard to learning.

It is difficult to determine the precise role that the *Introduction to a devout life* had in the Visitandine *pensionnats* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We know that it greatly shaped the spiritual formation of the Visitandines, especially on the method of meditating and the practice of the virtues of humility and gentleness. Apparently, Jane herself saw it as a great guide for combating vanity and so advises her daughter Françoise, who was inclined to vanity: “Use the *Philothea* as a guide. It will lead you well. Don’t amuse yourself with these little vain things as rings and clothing.”⁴⁵ As mentioned above, *Philothea* also treats of chastity in a more direct way than was generally taught in the convent schools. This letter assumes that Françoise was, who was raised in the Annecy monastery, was already acquainted with an unexpurgated version of this celebrated spiritual work. Whether this book was used as a text in the boarding schools of the Visitation is not easy to determine, but it certainly must have been used as a teacher’s guide since it contains so many of the pedagogical principles of St. Francis de Sales on how to raise children for training in virtue, i.e., character formation.

Profane Subjects

Reading was considered the most important since it was seen as “an instrument of salvation”⁴⁶ because it enables one to access Sacred Scripture. Incidentally, the teaching nuns of the seventeenth century were considered to be quite biblically literate. This is especially evident in their circular letters and other writings. “[The novices] were taught their Scriptures. Anyone who questions the biblical formation of the Old Regime nuns should take note of the density of their biblical allusions in their discourse.”⁴⁷

Writing was looked upon as a separate skill from reading and was generally frowned upon for women by seventeenth century French society primarily because it upset the social order. There are “cases of synodal regulations and Episcopal ordinances specifically forbidding girls’s schools to teach writing.”⁴⁸ It should be noted that Francis had no inhibitions with regard to women writing. Specifically, in his 14 October to Jane, he recommends that she “visit” the Abbess de Puits d’orbe by writing to her. So he had absolutely no qualms about women learning to write. As a matter of fact, writing was one of the skills, especially letter writing, in which the early Visitandine educators excelled. It is thanks to the very skillful writing of a number of the early Visitandines that much of their early history was carefully preserved. No doubt, their students

entendements à ce que nous lisons, sans passer outré, et ainsi, il leur fait grand bien, car il y a bien de l’ignorance parmi nous autres,” *Correspondance*, Letter to Mother Favre, 25.

⁴⁴ Pt. 3, ch. 5.

⁴⁵ *Correspondance*, 1:446.

⁴⁶ *Dévotes*, 159.

⁴⁷ Rapley, *Social History*, 168.

⁴⁸ *Dévotes*, 162.

greatly benefitted from the gift of writing that a number of the Visitandines exhibited.

Orthography or spelling was taught only after a student mastered writing. It seems logical that these two skills would go hand-in-hand since one could hardly write well without being able to spell correctly. The method for teaching writing was for the teacher to write something out and have the student copy what she wrote. So the students would at the same time have to learn how to spell. In the early part of the seventeenth century, French orthography was evolving as we note from the variable spellings of the same word in Francis's *Oeuvres completes*. So it must have been somewhat challenging.

Students took arithmetic only after they mastered reading in Latin and French. The exercises were very practical and centered on the buying of cloth, yarn, food, etc. and maintaining household accounts.

Handwork was the most important after reading and involved such things as embroidering, crocheting, dress-making, etc. It was taught only after students mastered reading; otherwise, they would get so wrapped up and absorbed in the handwork that they neglected to make progress in reading.

The Role of Salesian Spirituality and the Visitandines in la maison Saint-Cyr, l'Institut St. Louis

The school of Saint-Cyr, known also as the Institut St. Louis, established by the formidable Madame de Maintenon, second wife of Louis XIV, for young girls of economically disadvantaged noble families perhaps represents the zenith in the education of young women of seventeenth century France. Despite the negative critiques of Fénelon, Fleury and others of the girls's convent schools, most recent evaluations are more favorable. They were credited for being largely responsible for the increased literacy among girls and of offering them the best available education which was appreciated as a real service to society.⁴⁹ None was more effective in this regard than Saint-Cyr.

The role of Salesian spirituality was very prominent in the training of teachers and in the curriculum of Saint-Cyr primarily because of the great admiration that Madame Maintenon had for St. Francis de Sales, especially the *Introduction of the Devout Life* and his letters. In fact, she wanted to imbue her teachers with the Salesian spirit: "She loved especially the works of St. Francis de Sales and found in them a source of instruction so true and reasonable on genuine devotion that she continually read it, although written in an old style, for she did not dwell on the beauty of language in her spiritual reading but on the solidity of the things it contained, and she did her best to inspire us with this spirit."⁵⁰ The following lively exchange between Madame

⁴⁹ See Rapley, *Social History*, 83. Note also how the Visitation monastery in Milan was the only one not suppressed because it had a boarding school valued by the city fathers. See Paola Vismara, "Le monastère de la Visitation et l'esprit salésien à Milan au XVIIIe siècles, in *Visitation et Visitandines*, 495.

⁵⁰ *Mémoires sur madame de Maintenon recueillis par les dames de Saint-Cyr* (Paris: Olivier-Fulgence, Éditeur, 1846), 198. The teachers of Saint-Cyr were known as "les dames de Saint-Cyr."

Maintenon and her students is very illustrative of her admiration and familiarity with the *Introduction to a Devout Life*:

Madame had us read in the collection of the spiritual letters of St. Francis de Sales the letter addressed to: “A Lady In Order to Exhort Her to Be Generously Humble and Holy Joyful,” where she writes: ‘Maintain a spirit of holy joy, which in moderation is evident in your actions and words, give consolation to people of good will who will see you so that they will glorify God....’” Madame interrupted this reading and had us notice the goodness and solidity of the spirit of St. Francis de Sales which is her saint of preference. She spoke to us of his straightforwardness, his gentleness, of the reasonable and persuasive manner with which he led souls to God and even to the highest perfection almost without their perceiving it.

- Don’t let the graphic language, she added, turn you off. I find that it never detracts from truth and utility. Do you know him, my children, and do you enjoy his maxims?
- Yes, Madame, de Mornay eagerly replied, I like and enjoy them.
- Can you cite for me some of his maxims?
- De Mornay was caught up short, greatly humiliated that she had so audaciously put herself forward.
- She then questioned Glapion, who responded:
- Madame, he says in one chapter of his *Introduction to a Devout Life*, which treats of the way we should observe poverty in the midst of riches that gardeners of princes are careful and diligent in cultivating and embellishing the gardens for which they are responsible as if they were their own because they consider them as belonging to kings and princes to whom they wish to ingratiate themselves by their service and that likewise we must not regard the things we have as belonging to us but to God who has given us the stewardship of them to use them for his glory and our salvation, and for the usefulness of our neighbor, and that with this disposition we are pleasing to God in taking care of them.
- That’s very good, Madame responded, but tell me, my dear Glapion, if you were married and you had an annual income of fifteen thousand *livres* and were quite comfortable, what would you do with your wealth?
- I would feed and clothe very well my children, Glapion answered. I would pay my debts; I would help my neighbors who are in need; I would take care of the abject poor and of all those that I would see in misery; I would perform charitable works in the hospitals.
- All of that is excellent, but among all of these kinds of charitable actions, you would have to first prefer your poor parents, and the poor of your lands. But if your income were insufficient because of some unforeseen misfortune, wouldn’t you borrow in order to maintain your charitable actions with the intention of paying it back in six months or a year? Would that be unjust?
- No, Madame, Chabot said, that would on the contrary be a very good thing.

- If you really believed that, my daughter, Madame said, that this would be something good, you are mistaken. You mustn't borrow to do charitable actions and if you were to put your wealth into charity, what would your children live on? Who would pay your servants? There are very few persons to whom it is permitted to give all of their assets as alms. Take me, for example, I have no children and own the estate of Maintenon, not having received it as a legacy from my parents, which means I can dispose of it without wronging anyone. You must think of conserving your wealth and even of increasing it if it is not sufficient, especially you others who have very little. You should try to increase your resources by your economies.⁵¹

This whole exchange demonstrates very clearly what a very gifted teacher Madame de Maintenon was and how familiar she was with Salesian teaching. It also reveals what one author has observed about the nature of person in de Sales's day as compared to the individualistic concept of person that our society has as one of the legacies of the Enlightenment that emphasized individuality and personal autonomy.⁵² We must remember that she is teaching young girls of poor noble families. Madame de Maintenon explains that the obligation to one's family and heirs is a serious obligation; we cannot simply be concerned about giving charity to others without first thinking of our parents and family. Furthermore, it is perfectly logical and even necessary to increase one's wealth when it is not deemed sufficient for one's heirs. So one does not increase one's wealth for the sake of having more but of doing more and of taking care of those who come after us. It is noteworthy how the teachings of the saint on poverty is effectively used to inculcate a sense of social consciousness. No wonder Barbara Diefendorf saw how conducive Salesian teaching was for opening persons, especially women to the charitable works of St. Vincent de Paul and how even in our day it can prepare hearts for teaching and living Catholic social teaching.⁵³

We should keep in mind that this detailed and vivid account was that of a former student of Saint-Cyr and occurred prior to the Visitandines coming on the scene. This occurred in 1692 at the request of King Louis XIV in order to give the *dames* of Saint-Cyr a more solid, interior and fervent formation in the virtues of humility and the religious life after it was established as an

⁵¹ *Souvenirs d'une Bleue Élève de Saint-Cyr, Marguerite-Victoire de la Maisonfort à Geneviève de Colombe* (Octobre 1688-Février 1691) (Paris: Paul Olenorff, Éditeur, 1897), 109-112.

⁵² Following the insights of the Jesuit Rudolph Heredia, Fr. Anthony Ceresko, OSFS, points out how we have been deeply influenced by the Enlightenment's idea of personhood, which stresses "the individual, unique and isolated, focused on self and the interior life unrelated to the world and persons around us" (Ibid, p. 86). He shows how this conception of a person runs contrary to that of Francis' day: "A person in Francis' time was defined principally in terms of his or her *relationships* with others – husband and wife, parents and children, master and servant, noble and peasant, and so forth. Thus Francis' advice and direction to individuals presumed this wider web of relationship.... the concern for demands of the wider community, are implied in Francis's address to individuals. With our different understanding of 'person' today, we too often misunderstand Francis and overlook this *social commitment* implied in his writings. Thus, the challenge today is to reread, to reinterpret and develop this social commitment implied from the beginning in our tradition. Our modern understanding of the Christian vocation includes the call to challenge the unjust structures and arrangements in the economic, social, and political arenas. Thus we can enter into dialogue with Francis, as it were," Anthony Ceresko, OSFS, *St. Francis and the Bible* (Bangalore: S.F.S Publications, 2005) 86-87.

⁵³ See Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004), 179-80.

order with solemn vows and strict cloister. The Bishop of Chartres along with several priests of the *Missions étrangères* suggested that the Ursulines be asked to take over the novitiate for les *dames* de Saint-Cyr. However, Madame de Maintenon nixed this because she felt they might turn them all into Ursulines. So the decision was made to have “les filles de Sainte-Marie” (as the Visitandines were commonly known then) of the Chaillot monastery take over the formation program for the Novices. “She had also another reason to have the daughters of Holy Mary and this was because she greatly relished the spirit of St. Francis de Sales, which she had always tried to imbue us with. She believed these holy daughters would make us love him still more.”⁵⁴

So the Visitandines were selected because Madame de Maintenon believed that they were very effective teachers with regard to having her teachers love Francis de Sales and his teachings more. This speaks volumes about the reputation that the Visitandines had not only as teachers but especially as faithful and effective transmitters of the Salesian tradition. The three Visitandines that were selected for this very delicate and demanding task were Mother François-Angélique Priolo, Sr. Marie-Constance Gobert and Sr. Marie-Elizabeth Le Moine.⁵⁵

The Impression that Mother Priolo and St. Marie-Constance Made

Happily, we have a detailed account of how well-received the Visitandines were and the impact that they had on les *dames* de Saint-Cyr:

They acquitted themselves with great care, zeal and skillfulness without forgetting anything to form us in the practice of all the religious virtues. God gave many blessings to their work...Their words were so effective that they impressed us as greatly as they did by their good example. We extremely enjoyed their instructions; they spoke very well, and we talked among ourselves about Mother Priolo that she was our Father Bourdaloue. We were no less pleased to listen to Mother Marie-Constance. She had the gift of exciting us with fervor. Her talks as well as those of Mother Priolo were filled with unction and a totally ardent though prudent zeal.

Even our recreations were spent in useful conversation but without affectation and constraint. Mother Marie-Constance, had an admirable talent for this. We were never so happy nor joyful and content than when she recreated with us. She knew how to admirably mix the serious with the pleasant, and we would sometimes leave recreation more desirous for the love of God than when coming out of a conference. She had the graciousness to have us play innocent games in which she also participated.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Mémoires*, 325-26.

⁵⁵ See the circular letter written by Sr. Marie-Elizabeth Le Moine, “*Fondation et de l’Etablissement royal de Saint-Cyr*,” which speaks of Madame de Maintenon’s plan for the school, its initial initiatives, the ideas of King Louis XIV, and the arrival of Mother Priolo and the other two sisters. This is noted in Bordes, 3.

⁵⁶ *Mémoires*, 351.

What a magnificent tribute! This passage beautifully emphasizes the stunning effect the Visitandines had on the character formation of the *dames*. It is especially interesting to note that it was during the time of recreation, leisure time, that the Visitandines, especially Mère Marie – Constance, had such a great influence on them because it showed their human side. It demonstrated the Salesian virtue of affability that makes other people relax and appreciate each other's company. They demonstrated a balance between the serious (*le solide*) and the pleasant (*l'agréable*). It certainly would be revealing to be able to read any of the talks that these two Visitandine nuns gave to the *dames* to see how they presented Salesian spirituality to future teachers. There were also evidently very eloquent, a marvelous combination for any teacher. So their superior communication and teaching skills significantly affected the *dames*.

Conclusion

In what ways can we say that the early Visitandines educators lived the mystery of the Visitation through their teaching? Francis de Sales's initial vision of the congregation he co-founded with Jane de Chantal had a provision for some of the sisters to go out occasionally to succor the needs of poor and sick women. In another words, it had a social outreach component or one of promoting a social consciousness. Even when he agreed to make it a religious order with solemn vows and strict cloister, he did not give in to Cardinal Marquemont's desire to change the name to the Presentation and also used every resource to allow for a modified cloister so that widows and others could make retreats and also permit the nuns to teach catechism to young girls and women. In their *pensionnats*, they were able to form the hearts and minds of their students with the teachings of both saints that was very conducive to creating an openness to social concerns and to reach out to the poor in a way that affected many more of the physically and spiritually impoverished. It was especially in this way that they lived the mystery of the Visitation by their teaching.

In the training of future teachers and future mothers, the Visitandine educators exponentially increased their influence because the teachers and mothers in turn would be equipped to imbue their students and their children with a social consciousness, with a spirit of visiting, of giving oneself to the needy. This was true not only with regard to their young charges but also the teaching of the catechism to women and allowing widows and other women to make retreats in their monasteries "In opening the convents of the Visitation to the devout laity, even on a limited basis, de Sales and de Chantal made them into centers of devout spiritual action. When he secured the appointment of Vincent de Paul as the Visitandines's new superior before he left Paris in 1619, de Sales assured the success of the apostolic role he envisioned for the Visitandines but also guaranteed its wider appeal....It is no coincidence that many of the women whose names are most closely associated with the new charitable institutes founded in seventeenth-century Paris had close ties to de Paul but also to the Visitation."⁵⁷

One interesting outcome strongly supports this view. The daughter of Madame Miramion, an outstanding Catholic woman, was a boarder at the Visitandine monastery on the Rue d'Antoine

⁵⁷ Diefendorf, 179-80.

in Paris. She was betrothed to Guillaume de Nesmond at the age of fourteen and a half. “The bride, true daughter of her mother, desiring that the poor should share in the joy of the occasion [the wedding] refused M. de Nesmond’s rich presents, and proposed to him that, instead of buying her more jewels, he should give a thousand *louis* to the poor in Paris. This generous suggestion ‘was accepted with pleasure by all the family, and immediately put in execution.’ Although only fifteen, Mme. de Nesmond proved worthy of her education and her mother’s counsels, and was soon able ‘to administer her fortune and her house with a propriety which established her in the world in a position of esteem and consideration she preserved all her life’”⁵⁸

This is a good example of one of the students of the Visitation *pensionnats* and the effect of her education and her upbringing. It definitely demonstrates a sense of social commitment. Of course, the fact that her mother, who made several retreats at the Visitation in Paris, was outstanding for her many charitable works and the founding of a teaching order for the poor, no doubt had a great positive influence on her.⁵⁹

This author has a sense that this working paper demonstrates that the subject of the early Visitandines as teachers is deserving of a much more thorough and extensive treatment by a careful study of the various manuscripts pertaining to this apostolate, documents that, unfortunately, were not available to him.

⁵⁸ M.M. Maxwell Scott, “Madame de Miramion (1629-1696),” *Catholic World*, May (1906):197.

⁵⁹ See Mary L. Gude, C.S.C., “Madame de Miramion and the Friends of Vincent de Paul,” *Vincentian Heritage Journal*, 20, no. 2 (1999):239-250.