



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Mary de Sales Chappuis (1793-1875): Apostle of the Salesian Spirit

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Call to be an Apostle

Salvation history is replete with stories of little people, whom God has chosen to fulfill monumental tasks. The story of our salvation in the new dispensation began with the visit of God's messenger to a teenage girl in an obscure town of a country not known for its wealth, power or prestige. It was further developed with the choosing of the apostles, who were quite ordinary and seemingly untalented men, but, when inflamed and inspired by the Holy Spirit, changed the world. To continue their work, God has, down the centuries, frequently turned to some of the most unlikely people. We have seen this in recent times, especially in the life of St. Theresa of Lisieux and in the bona fide apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to humble peasant children at La Salette, Lourdes and Fatima.

It is the goal of this study to show how God's special intervention and election were also evident in the life of Marie-Trérèe Chappuis born in the little Swiss village of Soyhières in the Jura mountains, which was annexed by France during the French Revolution. Hers was a pious and deeply religious Catholic family. She was one of eleven children, six of whom entered the religious life. Marie-Térèse was deeply attached to family and loved her hometown and the surrounding country side.¹ To complete her education, she went to the Visitation boarding school in Fribourg at the age of 14 and remained there for two years.

Marie-Térèse had both an attraction and a revulsion for the religious life. She first entered the Visitation monastery in Fribourg in 1811 but only stayed a few months, suffering from a severe bout of home sickness. After three painful years at home, she again entered the Fribourg monastery but hesitated at the doorway because she experienced the same revulsion as before. But her sister and brother, who had accompanied her, convinced her to try it out for three days and if she still felt home sick, then they would come to take her back. Her anxieties were immediately relieved when she heard the monastery door slam behind her.²

It was during her novitiate year that Marie-Thérèse, who had taken the name of Marie de Sales at her profession, experienced in her prayer life extraordinary insights into her relationship with God and the plans that he had in store for her. She steeped herself in the writings of St. Francis de Sales and later exclaimed that she found everything she needed and wanted in his writings and did not bother to read other spiritual books.³ At the request of Bishop Jenny, Ordinary of Lausanne and Geneva, relayed through her confessor, she wrote down the transformations that God worked in her heart during her novitiate. She called these writings the "Cahier de Fribourg" and thus they became later known as *Le petit Cahier de Fribourg*.⁴

This *Cahier* had for Father Brisson great significance for the origins of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. The key passage regarding the understanding of her mission in life reads as follows:

My heart has been opened wide. There has just been placed in it an inspiration, which shows me clearly the wishes of the Lord, that he wants to direct my whole being. I shall experience his activity in a special manner. My whole being will be destroyed in every way. God ought to be known -- his will is that his life in me serve that purpose. Here is how I shall be. After he sends a bright and powerful fire which must change the human creature, everything in my life will be for that purpose. This change will be for both the interior and exterior. From that time on my memory will be regulated [according to God's will], my understanding enlightened, my spirit free, my heart detached and entirely united, my senses serving the designs of the Lord. Through his mercy these [faculties] will have the gift of coming in contact with him. I seem to understand that the world will be reformed. I must perform the role of an apostle. (Carney, p. 38)⁵

These mystical encounters are difficult to communicate verbally and hence need to be interpreted with caution because she is not speaking here as a theologian. Nonetheless, it is clear that she saw herself to be an apostle, a role that appears to be at odds with that of a cloistered Visitandine nun. How many can be that sure of their calling and at the very beginning of the religious life? Yet she sees herself as an apostle destined to reform the world - a very tall order, but a mission that she did not hesitate to communicate. Realizing the apparent contradiction in an apostolic calling for a cloistered Visitandine nun, she asks pardon of her Novice Mistress, but simply adds with assurance that she was only writing down what was revealed to her by God.⁶

But for one who had read, reread and meditated on the *Spiritual Conferences* of the Founder of the Visitation, she very likely saw no inherent contradiction between a contemplative and an active life.⁷ For the saint himself, in speaking of the vocation of the Visitandines, calls them apostles and says to those nuns departing to establish a new foundation:

Ah! What grace does God bestow upon you! He makes you apostles (*apostresses*), not in dignity but in office and merit. You will not preach, it is true, for your sex does not permit it, although indeed St. Magdalene and her sister Martha did so, but you will not cease to exercise the apostolic office by communicating your manner of life... (OEA, 6, 90-91)⁸

So the young religious was very familiar and comfortable with the calling of being apostle, a calling she admirably fulfilled "by communicating [her] manner of life," as this study intends to show. Her preparation for this mission as well as her means of carrying it out were the result of her unflinching and unfailing fidelity to her Salesian vocation as a Visitandine, which prompted one of her biographers to characterize her as "the most experienced interpreter and most faithful reflection of [the saint's teaching]." ⁹

Her Salesian Teaching

This unqualified endorsement of the "Good Mother," as she was affectionately called, from one who was very closely associated with her over a period of forty years, along with the commonly held belief that she was *the* authentic interpreter of Salesian teaching in her day should make it relatively easy for us to expound her understanding and development of this teaching.¹⁰ But Father Brisson himself tells us, "I hesitated a long time before listening to the Good Mother, but now I have a very deep and vivid sentiment within in me.... [of the inestimable value of this teaching]"¹¹. However, given the nature of the writings of mystics, they can easily be misinterpreted and need to be read very carefully. Aware of this difficulty, Father Brisson cautions the early Oblates :

These writing of the Good Mother can be interpreted, explicated and applied in all kinds of ways. ...One should first look for the meaning of the writings of the Good Mother in the sense of the Gospel, of what Our Savior says, of what the Church teaches... If one wants to find in them theological or mystical teachings, ..., one can do so. But one has to be extremely careful....¹²

So Father Brisson clearly foresaw the danger of misinterpreting, misunderstanding or maliciously attacking her teachings. Even the Superior of the Paris Visitation, Marie-Michel De la Porte, who succeeded the Good Mother and initially was attracted to them, later began to suspect their orthodoxy and was able to rally a group of theologians with the help of l'abbé Surat to examine them. The upshot of this investigation was that they did not find anything unorthodox about them. To their credit, l'abbé Surat realized he had been taken in and apologized to the Good Mother as did Mother Marie-Michel.¹³ But this far from ended the controversies regarding the Good Mother's teaching, as we will point out below.

With this cautionary note, we would now like to give some of the highlights of the Good Mother's teaching to see how it effectively and faithfully reflects that of Francis and Jane. It is not our purpose here to go into great detail regarding her extensive writings. Her teaching has already been sufficiently treated by Father Brisson in his biography of the Good mother and especially in his voluminous retreat conferences, chapter talks, allocutions and homilies.¹⁴

Her deep understanding of and fidelity to Salesian spirituality and her ability to communicate it was recognized very early. In view of this, she was appointed at a young age as Novice Mistress at Fribourg , where practically all of her novices "were called to found new houses or were requested by different monasteries to be superiors or Mistresses of Novices" (*Vie*, p. 97). To those who thought she was too young for such an important post, the Mother Superior replied, 'She knows how to read in an old book; that is, in that of our Lord Jesus Christ, and there she will learn what is necessary to do and say'" (Abridgement , p. 11).

The Good Mother herself was requested to be the Superior of the Troyes Visitation when she was in her thirties. This was a very challenging assignment for a young nun, considering the history of that monastery. It was founded in 1631 and was infested with Jansenism for almost 100 years, forty of which it was under interdict. The nuns used all kinds of ruses and evasive tactics to avoid submitting to ecclesiastical authority. "They wound up by no longer going to confession or receiving Holy Communion and by excluding from their monastery every priest who came in the Bishop's name"¹⁵ The younger nuns were open to restoring the Salesian spirit and teaching, but the older ones proved to be more difficult. But the Good Mother imbued with the Salesian spirit of "winning hearts" so effectively used by St. Jane in her dealings with Visitandines finally got them to come around.¹⁶

The Spiritual Directory

Another factor that made it very difficult to restore Salesian spirituality in this monastery was the impact of the French Revolution which forced all of the nuns to leave their monastery and to live apart for a number of years. This independent living experience made them less inclined to get back to their roots and origins. The most effective way that Marie de Sales accomplished this was to restore and insist on the practice of the Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales. This little book, so long neglected not only by the Troyes Visitandines but by practically all of the other monasteries of the order, constituted for the Good Mother the very essence and distillation of the saint's teaching.¹⁷

In 1831 on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the founding of the monastery, she delivered a conference on the importance of the Directory.

If we are to resolve to correspond to the grace of this holy Vocation, we must keep ourselves in the presence of God by the faithful practice of the Directory; thereby the soul lives and acts according to the good pleasure of God, according to the will of God. If, during many years, we have not known how to reap the fruits concealed in this little book, if we have not received and made use of the lights which it sheds upon the soul, let us now comprehend how great, how precious the advantages attached to the practice of them; let us unite ourselves to them with affection, with devotion, with fidelity to repair the faults daily committed by us and by others" (as cited in Abridgement, p. 26).

This passage shows a clear connection between the practice of the Directory to that of living in the present moment; to the nature of the devout life by doing all that is pleasing to God, as

espoused in the saintly founder's classic work; and also as an efficacious means of reparation for personal sins and the sins of others. This idea of reparation is likely tied to the development of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to the political turmoil in France at the time, viz., the overthrow of King Charles X.

The young Superior stresses over and over again the serious obligation of the Directory for the Visitandine:

I repeat, that without the spirit of the Directory, one can never be enlightened so as to fully comprehend it, but with that spirit, the good God will give us light moment by moment...At the hour of death, God will only demand of us our fidelity to what is contained in this little book. The Directory gives the manner of doing everything. It is by observing the letter that we acquire the spirit, and it is by this spirit of the Directory that each one will cover herself; as with a mantle, taking another spirit than her own. If each one has the same spirit, she has also the same inclinations, and that is called living in union. To be a religious in heart, we must do what the Directory teaches. It came from the Heart of God; it has been sanctified by thousands, and thousand have been sanctified by it. It can never grow old" (as cited in Abridgement, pp.117-118).

At times she appears to overstress its importance, especially when she says, " I wish that our Lord would give nothing, yes, nothing at all to those who seek for anything but the Directory or elsewhere than in it, so that we may know for ourselves that all good for us is contained in this little book, and being well 'assured of its worth, we may make it known to all who shall come after us and transmit to them our esteem for it, which our own experience has made us conceive'" (Abridgment, pp. 30-31). She has an exaggerated way of speaking of the efficacy for our sanctification of the Directory by saying, "It has already saved so many souls..." This almost deifies this little book and can easily lead to misunderstandings. Of course, she is not speaking as a trained theologian, but, nonetheless, she had the responsibility of forming sisters to live the religious life. Also when she wants the Lord to give nothing but the Directory to souls, it is a bit disconcerting because the Scriptures, the very word of God, must certainly supercede the Directory.

Father Brisson gives a better balance to the importance and meaning of the Directory since his theological training would incline him to do so. We must not lose sight of the fact that the Directory itself urges us to read the *Introduction to a Devout Life* and the *Treatise*, especially to understand the nature of Salesian prayer. This advice, we know, was added by St. Jane herself. From the context, we assume that the Good Mother is speaking here to the novices, but this is not all that clear. If she wants this to hold also for the other sisters, then we have the problem of how St. Francis de Sales himself envisioned the Directory as a means for beginners in the religious life and that the goal of the multiplicity of exercises proposed by the Directory is intended to lead to a greater simplicity of action. Perhaps this is the difficulty of the author of the *Abrégé*, whom we must assume was advanced in the religious life.

These reservations notwithstanding, the Good Mother had marvelous and profound insights into the value of the practice of the Directory, which she communicated to her community, who in

turn shared them with other Visitandines and became central to her teaching and understanding of Salesian spirituality, her chief legacy to the Oblates and Oblate Sisters. This practice was the most effective way of living in the present moment. It makes us live a Trinitarian spirituality. "To follow the Directory is to honor God the Father, to enter into close communion with Him by submission, dependence and fidelity. It is to honor the Savior by allowing Him to operate in us that which He desires, clothing us with His merits and rendering us acceptable to the Heart of the Father. It is to honor the Holy Spirit by disposing us to receive His benign influence and thereby His lights, graces and inspirations" (Abridgement, p. 111). Time and time again, Father Brisson in his talks to the early Oblates stresses that their mission as conceived by the Good Mother was to "reprint the Gospel" so that people would again see the Savior walking on earth.¹⁸ The practice of the Directory is the way to accomplish this mission.

This little book is also important for our personal relations. "'By communion with Him, Marie de Sales observes, "we learn to deal with our neighbor..." (Abridgement, p. 76). In addition it greatly assists in obtaining a deeper self-knowledge and understanding because it helps us focus on those areas which need improvement and to be grateful for the many gifts that God gives and continues to give to us. (Cf. Abridgement, p. 79). Moreover, it can deepen community life by strengthening the liturgical life . " We cannot be united with God unless we are united with our neighbor by being careful to adapt our voices [while chanting the Office] to theirs, and for this purpose we must imbibe the spirit of the Directory" (Abridgement, p. 44).

So in the Good Mother's mind, the spirit of the Directory not only attunes us to God but also makes us very sensitive and attuned to our neighbor, especially while chanting his praises. This has implications for the relationship of the Directory to the liturgy and the praise of God. It is here perhaps where the nature of benevolent love becomes evident because it inclines each of the sisters, while chanting the Office, to be united. It creates solidarity and community of purpose, belief and action. It brings about a "union of hearts and voices." This is the comment she makes on the pleasure that a young man experienced in hearing the sisters chant the Office.

Two teachings which are unique to her and which apparently have developed from the faithful practice of the Directory are The Way (*La Voie*) and *Couper-Court* (Cut it short). Father Brisson makes frequent references to the Way in his talks and conferences. and explains this doctrine at length in his life of the Good Mother. "What did the Good Mother mean by this word - the Way? She meant a state of soul which consists of depending on the present will of God by accepting interiorly whatever is His good pleasure" (Bowler, p. 282). In one of his retreat conferences, he describes it as follows: "It is simply the union of our will with God's will, of our heart with his heart. It is the union of our whole selves with our Lord by our action, our desires, our sentiments and affections, our heart. Everyone who really wants to work on that with all his heart is in the Way, which the Good Mother speaks about".¹⁹

This was not a new doctrine, as the Good Mother, was quick to point out, but she saw it as having far reaching consequences for renewing the world. When we examine this teaching from the point of view of the Directory, we note this is precisely what the article on the Direction of Intention is intended to achieve, viz., the union of our wills and our hearts with the will and the heart of God.

Those Oblates who are familiar the Good Mother have heard about her expression "*couper-court*." It is simply the cutting short of any reflections or thoughts that lead us to self-indulgence, self-absorption or self-pity and makes us put up with whatever physical, psychological or spiritual pain we experience and turn our hearts and minds back to God, thereby freeing us from looking back and aiding us to move forward with our lives.²⁰ Put in a more contemporary way, this practice does not make us stop to nurse our hurts or our wounds, real or imagined.

There are many aspects of her teaching that can have a special meaning for us today. But two in particular can have relevance for both our spiritual and apostolic lives. The first is what I would call a sacramental view of the world and the second, closely allied with it, a spirituality of work. The attitude of sacredness and reverence that she had for material things and the material universe especially strikes a resonant chord in our ecologically sensitive society and world. Basing his teaching on what he says he learned from the Visitandines and, above all, from the Good Mother, Father Brisson makes this profound reflection on the sacredness of creation:

God's creatures bring with them their grace. In practice, let us have a great respect for material things which religious obedience and poverty place in our hands. In the use we make of these things, there is praise which mounts toward God and which God hears very clearly, though our bodily ears do not hear it. May the beating of our heart, may the prayer which goes forth from this heart be in harmony with the prayer of the creature, which we do not hear. We will offer then to God not only a morning and evening sacrifice, but a perpetual sacrifice of our whole life of all our works.²¹

This attitude toward the material universe echoes that of biblical canticle (Dan. 3:57-88) and quite naturally forms the basis for a spirituality of work and, in particular, manual labor. The underlining belief of a spirituality of work promoted by the Good Mother and further developed by Father Brisson is that we are made in the image of God, who sanctified and glorified work, especially in creating the universe. We most resemble the Creator by our human activity. When the Creator works in, with and through us, then we become collaborators and co-creators with God, thereby reflecting God's presence and continued activity in the world. Father Brisson, under the inspiration of the Good Mother ties the belief in the sanctity of human work to the faithful practice of the Directory. "This reflection, let us note well," he says, "is not only a pious thought. It is our Directory, our Rule and our Constitutions...."²²

In addition to bringing us closer to God, work brings us closer to all of those who work. It makes us appreciate the toil, trials and effort that especially marked the workers in a highly industrialized city like Troyes. "I believe, and if I'm not mistaken in this matter, that the thought of the Good Mother was that the Oblates, brought into existence at this time, act decisively and have a role to play in that great question of work and workers. They are to exercise a healthy influence; they must act. What are they to have? What should their activity be? God knows the answer, but we also know that to be in touch with the age in which we live, and to usefully serve holy Church, we have to have to be in contact with workers"²³ This appears to be a forerunner of the Priest-Worker movement in France and speaks volumes of how he and the Good Mother saw a basic shift in the way that priests need to view their calling, viz., not that of an elite group in society but one that closely associates itself with the common, ordinary working class.

Apostolic Endeavors

The Good Mother's teaching on the sanctity of material things and of work, so passionately and convincingly embraced and enunciated by Father Brisson makes us readily understand why she became so involved in either the planning, founding, administration of so many movements intended to serve needy human beings. The need to reach out to workers in a city like Troyes was so inescapable to her. The closer she becomes united with God, the more perceptive and capable she was of viewing society with God's compassionate glance and of generously responding to society's and the Church's needs.

When she was Superior in Paris, Father Beaussier consulted with her concerning his plan to help young men as they entered the work force to have a healthy, Christian environment by providing clubs or meeting places for them. She was very sympathetic to the idea and helped to administer these establishments and provided material and financial resources.(Cf. Vie, pp. 234-235).

At Troyes she was instrumental in establishing similar places for young working girls and women, who were exposed to all kinds of immoral and spiritually detrimental influences. She provided the resources to set up five of these houses. These were initially staffed by women volunteers, but it became increasingly difficult to find and hold on to such people. To give it a more stable structure, Father Brisson along with the Good Mother saw the need for a religious congregation of women to take over this important work. It was the Good Mother who suggested two graduates of the Troyes Visitation boarding school as likely candidates to found this new congregation. They were Léonie Aviat, who has been recently canonized, and Lucie Canuet, both of whom were making a retreat at the monastery to discern their vocation in life. It was the Good Mother who initially took charge of their formation, which followed the lines of Salesian spirituality, and outlined for Father Brisson, the co-founder, what the spirit and mission of this congregation would be. This is how the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales came into being and they were seen to be the apostolic arm of the Visitation, continuing the original vision of St. Francis de Sales for the Visitation, viz., reaching out to the sick poor and needy.

In fact, the Oblate Sisters were so imbued with the Salesian spirit and so closely identified with it that the rumor circulated that the Good Mother had established a bogus or counterfeit Visitation. Some monasteries were so upset about it that they contacted the Superior of the Annecy Visitation. The Annecy Superior sent an out-sister (*tourière*) to look into the matter, who, after being reassured by the Good Mother, returned and reported that there was no basis to the rumor. (Cf. Vie, pp. 408-409). In helping to found the Oblate Sisters, the Good Mother was fulfilling one of her great ambition, viz., that the spirit of St. Francis de Sales be shared with the greatest number of people possible"²⁴

Even though the Visitandines were cloistered, the boarding schools attached to their monasteries enjoyed and excellent reputation, especially that of Troyes. Bishop Coeur of Troyes (from 1849 to 1860), seeing the good results that a Visitation education achieved, one day wrote to the Good Mother: "My Very Reverend and Very Good Mother, you are doing marvels. Enlarge the walls of your boarding school as you know how to enlarge your heart! Instead of forty boarders I wish to see at least 80. I need to spread in my diocese the admirable spirit which distinguishes all

those whom you have educated and who are the glory of religion in their parishes. (Vie, pp. 317-324,333). These results that Bishop Coeur praised were not accident but derived directly from the Good Mother's vision of the apostolate of a Catholic education for girls:

Mother Mary de Sales understood that the main object of the Visitation schools should be to assist the Church by bringing up women imbued with a truly Christian spirit, which, at that time, was , as it still is, so greatly needed... For it was to lead them to God that she wished to have pupils; it was in order to guide them in the way of sanctification through the means offered by St. Francis de Sales, that she desired to unite under her roof those young children, who , later on, would carry his spirit into their families and into the world.²⁵

Not surprisingly, the Good Mother was very involved in the Troyes Visitation boarding school. "The influence of the Good Mother over the pupils extended itself to everything which concerned them. She understood how to guide their tastes and wills, and inspire them with sentiments of faith and piety, the love of work and study, and a desire for all that is beautiful, noble and generous" (Life, Brooklyn, p. 43). Not only was the quality of education given by the Visitation appreciated by the local bishop, but also beyond the confines of Troyes. "'The pupils of the Visitation hold their place everywhere,' says Cardinal Mermillod. 'They may be found in every [level] of society, carrying out the ideal of a Christian woman. They are neither above nor beneath anything. They attain equally the two extremities of every situation, and are as admirable, as great, and as complete in the most humble as in the highest ranks of society'" (Life, Brooklyn, pp. 44-45).

The Association of St. Francis de Sales was the first apostolic activity in which the Good Mother was involved. This apostolate, which had for its purpose to defend and spread the faith in Christian countries, was the idea of Bishop de Ségur. He needed reassurance from the Good Mother to begin the work. She got the boarding school students involved in it and was appointed Treasurer. (Cf. Vie, 3125-318). It took root and spread rapidly throughout the diocese of Troyes and before long numbered 4,000 associates in 22 parishes and increased in 1860 to 6,000 in 35 parishes.²⁶

One of apostolates that began with the support and encouragement of the Good Mother raised not only eyebrows but some formidable objections. Father Ferrand de Missol wanted to found a congregation of sisters who would take care of "dishonored girls" and assist them through their pregnancies and help them to pick up their lives again. Not an easy task in the society of that day. A number of people thought that this would not be an inappropriate apostolate and strongly opposed it . The only two who were in favor of it were the Good Mother and his confessor. In her great wisdom, "she ...assured [him] that there was nothing in this apostolate contrary to religious life and to the vows of religion. Daughter of her Blessed Father, St. Francis de Sales, she shared his big ideas" (Vie, pp. 235-26). Father Brisson's observation regarding the compatibility of such an apostolate with the ideas of the saintly bishop is very telling of the openness and responsiveness to the needs of all, whether perceived as honorable or dishonorable, that Salesian spirituality engenders.

The role that the Good Mother played in the spiritual direction of priests and prelates also had a significant impact in spreading the Salesian spirit . Père de Malet, to whom the Good Mother gave spiritual direction, in turn was confessor to several bishops and a whole host of pious priests to whom he gave spiritual direction (Cf. Vie, p. 229-230).

Her influence extended even to the teaching of moral theology in the Troyes seminary. Several of the priests who came to her for spiritual guidance were professors in the seminary. They wanted to bring a new orientation to their teaching, especially in moral theology. "A new spirit was inserting itself into this sacerdotal nursery. The faculty, abandoning the dry teaching in vogue, introduced practical questions relating to the needs of the time and went beyond the classic text either to give a much deeper presentation of a subject or to give us some clarifications on the spiritual life. We did not always follow the exclusive path of dialectics; the affective aspect of theology was also examined" (Vie, pp.185-186). In keeping with this new direction in theological studies, these priest professors asked the Good Mother about introducing the moral theology of St. Alphonsus Liguori. She heartily encouraged this innovation because, it seems, that this saint's writings were more in agreement with the Salesian spirit. (Cf. Vie, pp. 121-125).

It is quite unusual in that day for a nun, and a contemplative, to have such a direct and positive influence on the teaching of theology in the seminaries, especially when it is a question of reorienting the teaching.

Founding of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales

The most extensive and lasting influence that the Good Mother exercised on priests and the religious life of men was her involvement in the founding of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, which she perceived to be the culmination of her life's work and her very *raison d'être*. She believed, in retrospect, that it was the work that the Lord was calling her to from the time she entered the novitiate.²⁷ Her role here has been amply documented by Father Brisson and the early Oblates. So there is no need to go into great detail here. Father Brisson's long resistance in founding the Oblates is well-known. However, some aspects of it are worth repeating because of what they reveal about the Good Mother and how she conceived of her calling as an apostle to spread the Salesian spirit.

The Good Mother said to Father Brisson when he was a young priest: " I'm going to take plenty of time because I will have to tell you what God wants to do in order to manifest his love and utilize the merits of the Savior. God considered and decided to open up new sources of grace. He wants me to work with him, you to be the witness and be given the responsibility to carry out whatever will be necessary to communicate to the world the effects of this action " (Vie, p. 253-254).

What comes through here is the absolute assurance the Good Mother has about knowing the will of God in this matter. It can be off-putting because God's will in such matters is generally not that clearly known or understood, but she speaks with all of the confidence and certainty of an OT prophet. This might explain why Father Brisson was so reluctant to accept what he considered at that time to be her view of God's will for him and responded by telling her that he

was at her service to hear confessions and to assist her in the administration of the monastery but that he thought he had neither the ability nor the lights to assume the enormous responsibility of such an undertaking. He felt so besieged by her importunities in this affair that he kept saying to himself: "Who will deliver me from this woman? What am I to do? Where can I go?" She was so adamant (*Vie*, 254)

In the face of his reluctance, the Good Mother says to him, "But suppose God leads you to it?" Well, Mother, " he replied, "since you put it that way, I declare to you that nothing will ever lead me to it. Even if I see someone rise from the dead, I will not give in" (*Vie*, 259).

This whole encounter reveals how the Good Mother viewed her role in this work or apostolate. She sees herself as working with God in this mission. "He wants me to work with Him in this apostolate" ("*Il veut que j'y travaille avec lui...*") i.e., she takes an active role in the foundation of the Oblates and in doing so it is God's will that she work with God. So she sees herself as a collaborator or co-creator with God in this particular mission. It speaks volumes about how she understood the importance of free will in accepting God's will in this undertaking .

Controversy over Her Writings

There remains one other matter to discuss, and this is the controversy concerning the life, works and especially the writings of the Good Mother, a controversy which has stymied and stalled her cause for Beatification. This controversy has its origins in the bitter ten-year battle that Father Brisson had with his ordinary, Bishop Cortet, primarily over the question of who had authority over the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales - the Bishop or the Superior General.²⁸ The Bishop was not in favor of in seeing the Good Mother's cause for canonization progress because it would legitimize Father Brisson's position of authority over the newly found religious congregation. So when Father Brisson set about writing the life of the Good Mother, he knew that the Bishop would not be in favor of it.

As a matter of fact, the Bishop actually did his utmost to undermine it by writing to all the French bishops explaining to them that Father Brisson never received his imprimatur to publish this work and that it essentially was a repetition of Mother de Bellaing's Death Notice [*Abrégé*]. A special commission he set up to review this writing concluded, "The way in which the account is written tends to make things appear miraculous, which are susceptible to a natural explanation for these events are not sufficiently proven or can be explained naturally."²⁹ Bishop Cortet even tried unsuccessfully to dissuade the Archbishop of Tours, G.-René Meignan, who gave the imprimatur, to withdraw it. (*Biographie documentée*, p. 367). Without going into more detail in this unfortunate matter, suffice it to say that the Congregation of the Index found the biography to be "unassailable."³⁰

This unsavory affair has had lingering effects on the campaign to derail the Good Mother's cause. During the ordinary process of Troyes for her cause, one of the members of the tribunal, Father Nioré, Secretary to Bishop Cortet , was at the center of the whole campaign against the [Good Mother]. He took certain writings of the Good Mother home with him, copied those he thought would be detrimental to her cause and gave them to a Belgian Jesuit, Father Henri Watrigant, an unremitting enemy of her cause. At the time, Father Watrigant, was editor of the

Jesuit periodical, *Etude*, in which he published a series of articles attacking the teachings of the Good Mother and accusing her, above all, of the heresy of Quietism, using, all the while, these highly selected excerpts from her writings to bolster his case. After these defamatory writings appeared, Rome re-examined her writings and declared them to be unacceptable (*tolerari non posset*). "Following the judgment came the decision of the Pope that the cause must be set aside (*reponatur*)." ³¹

In his analysis of Watrigant's so-called "Vocabulary," which compared in parallel columns certain expressions of Madame Guyon, the 17th century mystic accused of quietism, with those of the Good Mother, Father Balducelli convincingly and conclusively demonstrates the absurdity of such a method: "To construct an argument," he states, "that would prove direct dependence, one would have to superimpose not the words but the ideas expressed by these words and show that they overlap" (p. 27). The several examples he gives clearly indicate that not only is there no convergence of ideas, but, in some cases, opposition of ideas. (Cf. pp. 27-30).

Unfortunately, the Oblates have not been successful in obtaining the Vatican documents dealing with the Good Mother's cause and therefore cannot appropriately respond to the objections that were raised. And there the matter currently rests. However, if indeed these objections are primarily based on Father Watrigant's writings, then Father Balducelli's masterfully scholarly presentation would be that appropriate response.

Conclusion

It seems that in the lives of many saintly people; difficulties, suffering and pain were not only a part of their lives, but frequently their cause for canonization encountered all kinds of obstacles and hurdles and became embroiled in petty, personal and political ambitions. This certainly was the case with the cause of St. Francis de Sales as engagingly described in the life of Mother de Chaugy, St. Jane's biographer.³² Although it is the Church's prerogative to decide on her holiness, this should not stand in the way of evaluating, recognizing and appreciating her lasting contributions in promoting the Salesian spirit and charism.

It is refreshing to see how she understood and carried out her calling to be an apostle of the Salesian spirit. At every opportunity presented to her, whether this be the founding of community organizations for the poor, young working class, both men and women; organizations to promote and defend the Catholic faith; the education of young women; new directions in the teaching of theology; spiritual direction; and the founding of religious institutes, she saw them as vehicles for promoting and transmitting the spirit and teaching of St. Francis de Sales. "Without the influence that Mother Chappuis had on [Father Brisson], without the prayers and the financial support of the Visitandines of several monasteries, he would not, undoubtedly, have founded the Oblate Sisters and the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, and would have had difficulty in succeeding to maintain and develop the high schools and other projects directed by these two Congregations." (*Biographie documentée*, chap. III). Father Brisson would have been the first to agree with this assessment.

It was especially through these two religious congregations that the Good Mother's Salesian apostolic efforts achieved and continue to achieve their greatest and more lasting effects. The

Good Mother profoundly understood how God's grace and calling work graciously in the hearts of those so favored without destroying human freedom. She sensed that, by inspiring the founding of the Oblates, God was working in and with her, effectively making her his co-creator and collaborator. This conviction eventually won over Father Brisson.

Her apostolic endeavors, far from diluting her contemplative vocation or weakening her spiritual life, deepened them as she shared her life and gifts with the outside world and generously responded to the needs of society. Her visitations from God in the novitiate and throughout her life enriched these encounters and these, in turn, gave her a more profound grasp of Salesian spirituality. This interaction is reminiscent of the observation that St. Francis de Sales makes in his understanding of the mystery of Visitation, viz., that Mary, after serving the needs of Elizabeth, uttered the Magnificat, the greatest of all contemplative prayers.

Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis in her exemplary life as a Visitandine and sensitivity to the world's crying needs can serve as a model for those who want to combine a contemplative life with an apostolic heart, which de Sales sees as the authentic expression of the devout life.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. Roger Balducelli, OSFS, *Première Partie: Mère Marie de Sales Chappuis: Esquisse biographique*, (for private distribution only.) He cites her as saying, "Rien n'était aussi doux que notre vie à Soyhières. Nous étions nombreux, nous nous aimions et tout allait bien. Que de promenades, que de courses dans les bois. Et quand nous revenions à la maison, que de jeux dans le jardin, que de douces surprises nous réservait notre bonne Mère." [Procès de Béatification de la Mère Chappuis], *Summarium super dubio An constat de virtutibus* [.....], Rome 1911, p. 108. See also Mère Marie de Bellaing, *Abrégé de la vie et des vertus de notre très-honoré et vénérée Mère MARIE DE SALES CHAPPUIS* (Troyes: s.d.,s.l.) English Translation: *Abridgement of the Life of the Venerable Mother Mary de sales Chappuis*, trans. Sisters of the Brooklyn Visitation, (Brooklyn, NY: n.p., n.d.) Le R. P. Brisson, *Vie de la Vénérée Mère Marie de Sales Chappuis de l'ordre de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie* (Paris: Chez l'Aumonie de la Visitation, 1891) and the English translation: *Life of the Venerable Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis*, trans. Joseph Bowler, OSFS (Center Valley, PA.: Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, 1986. A shorter biography, *The Venerable Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis* (Brooklyn, Sisters of the Visitation, 1924).

² Cf. Brisson, *Vie*, 64: "*Arrivée de nouveau à Fribourg, à peine a-t-elle franchi la porte extérieure de l'église du couvent que ses appréhension lui reviennent, et cette fois plus fortes que jamais. Elle veut absolument s'en retourner*"

³ "...she received the habit on June 3, 1815 and took the name Sister Mary Francis de Sales, thus giving her as patron him whom she already honored as her father and model, him of whom she could then say what she repeated later: 'Everything delights me in our Holy Founder. He not only satisfies my reason but he charms my heart and my imagination. I love nothing so much as his direction' (*Abridgement*, p.8)

⁴ Cf. *Le petit Cahier de Fribourg*, edited, annotated with an introduction by Roger Balducelli, OSFS (Troyes: private printing, 2000); *The Little Notebook of Fribourg (Le Petit Cahier de Fribourg)*, analysis, translation and commentary by Edward Carney, OSFS (Private Printing, n.p., n.d.). There seems to be a discrepancy concerning the exact date when this little book was written. Fr. Balducelli rightly corrects the date given by Fr. Brisson in his *Vie* and states, "She 'entered the novitiate at the Visitation of Fribourg in Switzerland on June 4, 1815... On June 9 of the following year [1816], she was admitted to the profession of vows During that year, she filled 56 pages of a notebook with entries concerning disclosures and graces coming her way day by day." (p. 3). But then says, "... by the time the novitiate came to an end, a notebook was there to tell about the religious experiences which had been such a valuable part of it" (p. 4). So it was either written in 1815 or 1816, i.e., very early in her religious life. Also,

Father Brisson says that these writings were done under obedience to her Superior and Mistress of Novices: "Sa Supérieure, sa maîtresse des novices, lui ordonnèrent d'écrire ce qu'elle recevait de Dieu" (*Retraites de l'Année 1818*, Deuxième Instruction: "Les origines des Oblats," p.21).

⁵ "Mon coeur est au large. Il vient d'y être mis par une communication qui me montre clairement les volontés du Seigneur. Il veut être le mouvement de tout moi-même. Je le sentirai agir d'une manière particulière; tout moi sera détruit en toute façon. Dieu doit être connu, sa volonté est que sa vie en moi serve à cela. Voici comment je serai: toutes les choses de la vie me seront à charge, après qu'il m'aura fait passer une flamme vive et efficace, qui doit transformer l'homme. Cette transformation sera tant pour l'intérieur que pour l'extérieur. Dès lors, ma mémoire sera réglée, mon entendement éclairé, mon esprit libre, mon coeur détaché et entièrement uni. Mes sens serviront, en effet, aux desseins du Seigneur; il leur sera donné miséricordieusement de l'expérimenter. Il me semble voir que le monde sera réformé; je dois faire la fonction d'apôtre" (*Cahier*, R. Balducelli, p. 9).

⁶ Cf. *Cahier*, Balducelli, p. " C'est pourquoi son esprit se tourne immédiatement vers la maîtresse des novices pour demander pardon : ' Pardonnez-moi " (438). Cette demande est suivie d'un acte de courage sans inquiétude : "J'écris ce je vois qui plaît à Dieu. Je ne dois pas craindre les communications, ni la vue de Notre Seigneur. Toutes ces choses, quoique pas Dieu même, ni nécessaires au salut, doivent servir à ses desseins' "

⁷ "While some of her companions read the most mystical authors, she was content with our holy writings, assuring us that she had always found there the light and assistance needed. Our mother ever preserved this inclination, so conformable to our vocation, to the close of her life. When she heard read in the refectory, the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, or the *Entertainments* (sic) of our Holy Father, she found in them her delight, and conversed at recreation on these subjects with such unction as almost to ravish us out of ourselves. 'Each time, she said, "I understand them better, and realize still more the truth of our Holy Founder's saying that he will always supply us with new lights" (*Abrégement*, p. 10) It is interesting to note how "*Entretiens*" is translated as "Entertainments." From one perspective, they did provide spiritual recreation for the sisters.

⁸ See my article "St. Francis de Sales and Feminism," *Salesian Living Heritage*, Spring 1986 where I attempt to show the influence of the saint on Mary de Gournay, a leading feminist of the day, The fact that she used, like the saint, a rarely found feminine form for apostle (*apostresse*) in a key passage on the liberation of women point to this influence.

⁹ "Le *Directoire*, les *Entretiens* de saint François de Sales faisaient ses délices. Chaque fois qu'elle les relisait et qu'elle les méditait, elle en recevait des lumières nouvelles. 'Je vous toujours, disait-elle, quelque chose de nouveau dans nos saints fondateurs; ' et, parlant de saint François de Sales: 'Tout ce qu'il dit me va; je le comprends. Je ne sais rien en dehors de ce qu'il nous a marqué... C'est le chemin le plus court pour aller à Dieu.' Aussi, verrons-nous, à la fin de cet ouvrage, comment elle a su interpréter la doctrine de son bienheureux Père. Elle en est le commentateur le plus expérimenté comme la copie la plus fidèle" (*Vie*, p. 84).

¹⁰ "Et vous savez que Pie IX disait de lui qu'on pourrait l'appeler le *Docteur infaillible*. Et en nous appuyant et fondant sur cette doctrine, nous sommes sûrs de la bien comprendre et interpréter, parce que nous avons comme guide la bonne Mère Marie de Sales, qui est, au sentiment des docteurs que j'ai vus à Rome, l'interprète la plus fidèle et la plus complète de la doctrine de son saint Fondateur." (R. P. Louis Brisson, *Retraites*, " Troisième Instruction Mercredi 20 août 1890," édition millénaire, annotées et avec introduction par Roger Balducelli, OSFS, p. 2

¹¹ J'ai hésité bien longtemps avant d'écouter la bonne Mère mais maintenant, j'ai un sentiment bien intime et bien vif au dedans de moi-même.... (*Retraites de l'Année 1898*, "Première Instruction - La Retraite," p. 11)

¹² "Ces écrits de la bonne Mère peuvent être interprétés, expliqués et appliqués de toute espèce de manières. Le premier venu y trouvera tout ce qu'il voudra; le second, le troisième y trouveront encore autre chose. Il faut chercher le sens des écrits de la bonne Mère tout à fait dans le sens de l'Evangile, de ce que Notre-Seigneur a dit, de ce que l'Eglise enseigne. De cette façon c'est la perfection. A Rome on me l'a dit. C'est ce qu'il y a de meilleur. Maintenant,

si l'on prend les écrits de la bonne Mère pour la direction spirituelle des âmes, dans un autre ordre d'idées que celui-là; si l'on veut y chercher des enseignements théologiques et mystiques, c'est bien, on peut le faire. Mais il faut pour cela des précautions immenses. Il ne faut pas se lancer dans des interprétations plus ou moins hasardées. Avant tout, la bonne Mère pensait et parlait comme parle l'Évangile, comme parlent Notre-Seigneur et la sainte Église. Si vous prenez les écrits de la bonne Mère dans le sens de la vie mystique, mettez-vous en garde contre bien des choses: contre l'imagination, contre le parti-pris, contre des interprétations qui peuvent facilement devenir erronées. (*Retraites de l'année 1889*, Septième Instruction, "La prières pour les bienfaiteurs, la direction des âmes," p. 26).

¹³ *Vie*, pp. 484-485.

¹⁴ In a great number of these, he makes frequent and extensive references to the teachings of the Good Mother because he understood the mission of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales was to spread her teaching. " C'est à nous, mes amis, que revient cette charge de transmettre cette doctrine aux autres. Il faut que je vous avoue que j'ai eu un peu peur, il y a quelque temps, que d'autres ne prennent notre place." (*Retraite de l'Année 1889*, Première Instruction: "La retraite," p. 254).

¹⁵ "Elles avaient fini par ne plus se confesser ni communier, par exclusion de leur maison tout prêtre venant au nom de l'évêque, et par se faire interdire. Cet état de choses s'était prolongé pendant près de quarante ans" (*Vie*, p. 103). See also *Abrégement*, p. 15ff)

¹⁶ Cf. Wendy Wright, "That Is What It Is Made For': The Image of the Heart in the Spirituality of the Heart of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal," *Spiritualities of the Heart*, ed. Annice Callahan, R.S.C.J. (Mahwa, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 152-153.

¹⁷ Fr. Brisson knew that in stressing the importance of the practice of the Directory in his life of the Good Mother he would no doubt offend a number of the Visitation monasteries who considered this practice to be useless. (Cf. *Excerpts from talks given by Fr. Brisson to the Oblates, October 13, 27, 1886. Cf.: Chapitres*, vol. 1(1873-1887), éd. Tilburg, 1966, pp. 170-172.). This disinclination to the practice the Directory comes through even in Mother de Bellaing, who succeeded the Good Mother and who was the author of the *Abrégé*, where she writes: "Another subject of her pressing exhortations to beginners in the spiritual life was close attention to the truths of the Directory. She herself while still a postulant and a novice, had found in it so continual and profitable an occupation, that she would find herself at the close of each day to have been constantly filled with these thoughts as scarcely to know if she were living. It then became absolutely necessary for her to relax her mind at the quarter before supper" (*Abridgement*, p. 9). The phrase "scarcely to know if she is living" is revealing. >From what follows, it appears that the author is definitely implying that the practice of the Directory was very spiritually and mentally taxing, even for one as advanced in the Salesian spiritual life as the Good Mother. But is this what the Good Mother really believed was the result of practicing the Directory?

¹⁸ *Retraite d'Août 1896*: Première Instruction, "La Retraite," et passim.

¹⁹ *Retraites de l'Année 1891*, Première Instruction, "Ce que c'est que la Voie"

²⁰ Cf. *Retraite de l'année 1885*, Douzième Instruction, "Le Sacrifice": "La bonne Mère indique un sacrifice habituel, c'est le *couper-court*. Quand survient une peine, il faut couper-court à toute réflexion, à tout murmure, et dire: "J'accepte". Quand arrive une tentation d'orgueil, de sensualité, il faut encore couper-court. On vous fait de la peine, on vous témoigne du mépris. Pourquoi vous y arrêter? Pourquoi étendre de ce côté-là vos *cogitations*, comme dit saint François de Sales? Coupez-court! Le sacrifice ainsi compris et pratiqué est extrêmement agréable à Dieu. Le couper-court à ce qui nous rattache à notre volonté propre, à ce qui nous fait regarder en arrière, à ce qui nous engule et nous retient captifs."

²¹ *Retraite de l'année 1888*, Septième Instruction, "Le Travail": "Les créatures de Dieu portent avec elles leur grâce. Pour la pratique, gardons donc un grand respect aux choses matérielles que l'obéissance, que la pauvreté

religieuse nous mettent entre les mains. Il y a dans l'usage que nous faisons de ces choses une louange qui monte vers Dieu et que Dieu entend, bien que nos oreilles corporelles ne l'entendent point. Que le battement de notre cœur, que la prière qui jaillira de ce cœur soient en unisson avec cette prière de la créature que nous n'entendons pas. Nous offrirons alors à Dieu non seulement le sacrifice du matin et du soir, mais le sacrifice perpétuel, l'holocauste complet de notre vie tout entière et de toutes ses œuvres.

²² *Loc. cit.*

²³ *Retraite de l'année 1891*, Quatrième Instruction, "Etre des travailleurs" The Good Mother's and Father Brisson's teaching on the spirituality of work is very compatible with the current thinking on this topic, especially on how we can be spiritual at work. Cf. Gregory Pierce, *Spirituality@Work: Ten Ways to Balance Your Life on the Job* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001).

²⁴ *Annales Salésiennes*, Juin 1888, p. 21.

²⁵ Brooklyn Visitandines, *The Life of Venerable Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis of the Order of the Visitation Holy Mary (1793-1875)*: 1924, p. 42. .

²⁶ Cf. *Bulletin de l'Association*, November, 1861, pp. 287-290. Martha de Hédouville, *Msgr. de Ségur*, p.435, writes: "Brisson put together an army of lay persons." In the minutes of the meetings, the Director frequently speaks of the organization of the Association in Troyes, (Cf. *Écrits Brisson*, vol. XVII, pp.76-77, 220-222, XVII, pp. 83-94, 176-177 as cited in the *Positio super virtutibus, Biographie documentée* of Father Brisson.

²⁷ After Bishops Ravinet and Mermillod paid her a visit to ask her advice about the founding of a congregation of priests who would follow the footsteps of St. Francis de Sales, Fr. Brisson comments: "Cependant Dieu lui faisait sentir que c'était là [the founding of the Oblates] ce qu'elle avait toujours désiré; qu'elle arrivait au but de tout son travail intérieur et de tout ce qu'elle avait fait pour Lui, et qu'elle touchait enfin à la réalisation des promesses divines. C'était son oeuvre! (*Vie*, p. 428). Cf. also "Oblats de Saint François de Sales et leurs Oeuvres," *Annales Salésiennes* du 20 janvier 1893 (Tome 1892-1893); *Retraite de 1885*, conf. VI, Tilborg ed., IV, p. 124; *Abrégé*, 62

²⁸ This whole controversy has been fully and fairly treated for the first time in *Aloisii Brisson, Sacerdotis et Fundatoris Oblatorum et Oblatarum S. Franciscus Salesii (1817-1908): Biographie Documentée*, chp. VIII, pp. 347-464.

²⁹ Cf. Letter of Mother de Bellaing in 1888, in *SDA*, p. 298. This matter is explained, chap.VII of the *Biographie documentée*.

³⁰ For a detailed discussion and appropriate responses to Bishop Cortet's accusations, see *Biographie documentée*, pp. 369-378). Cf. Fr. Rolland to Fr. Perrot, March 28, 1887; Talks of Fr. Brisson to the Oblates, February 15, 1888 (*Chapters*, vol. II, p. 7) and February 17, 1888 (*Instructions et allocutions*, Tilburg ed. tr. J. Bowler, vol VII, pp. 35-36): "This book has been submitted to the judgment of the Holy See. They have not found a letter that needed changing. 'I took up my pencil while reading your book,' the examiner put in charge by the Congregation of the Index told me: 'from the first word to the final one, I did not find a thing to correct.' . . .The Congregation of the Index declared that -- insofar as these deeds were submitted subsequent to the Process, for the approbation of the Holy See, it was not fitting for anyone to pronounce against the supernatural character of those deeds. The Holy See is the sole judge."

³¹ Roger Balducelli, OSFS, *The Cause of the Beatification of the Venerable Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis*, trans. from the French Alexander Pocetto, OSFS (For Private Distribution). This is a conference delivered in French in 1993 at the Visitation monastery in Delémont, Switzerland giving the status of the Good Mother's cause and thoroughly demolishing the libelous attacks of Father Watrigant, labeling her teaching and life as tainted with the heresy of Quietism. (See p. 42)

³² Sister Marie-Patricia Burns, VHM, "*Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy, :Dans l'ombre et la lumière de la canoization de François de Sales* (Annecy: Académie Salésienne, 2002).
