



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

ALEXANDER T. POCETTO, O.S.F.S., PH.D.

Senior Salesian Scholar

### *Freedom to Love:*

### *A Close Reading of Francis de Sales’ Letter of 14 October 1604 to Jane de Chantal*

research presented at the Salesian Scholars Seminar (Stella Niagara) in 2004

published in *Human Encounter in the Salesian Tradition*, edited by Joseph Chorpenning, OSFS  
(Rome, Italy: International Commission on Salesian Studies, 2007), pages 125-144.

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#### **Freedom and Love**

Francis de Sales’ letter of 14 October 1604<sup>1</sup> is one of the more comprehensive and remarkable among the many missives he addressed to Jane de Chantal because it gives the background, direction and nature of this relationship. Our study will closely examine this very early communication between these two great saints primarily from a perspective of the freedom to love that it reflects and illuminates with an enduring and endearing clarity. For this reason, it might be helpful to first discuss the relationship between freedom and love in general and then see how it is revealed in this letter.

In American culture today, there is much confusion about the notion of freedom. It is conceived by many as a condition of being free from any constraints whether familial, societal, governmental or moral. In fact, we so highly prize freedom as an end in itself that we almost worship it. We even have a Freedom Shrine. Many clamor and insist on the freedom of choice and are not very much concerned with what is being chosen. This is one of the reasons that the so-called pro-choice movement has made such great inroads into our culture and has seriously disrupted our moral compass. The great English statesman, Edmund Burke (1729-1797) has aptly pointed out the danger of this kind of thinking. Essentially, he said that before you give

people unlimited freedom to do what they please, it behooves you to find out what it will please them to do.<sup>2</sup>

In Francis de Sales' day, the phrase "*liberté d'esprit*" (the spirit of liberty or freedom) had great appeal, especially through the work of a theologian and well-known preacher, Pierre de Charron (1541-1603), *La Sagesse*. (Wisdom).<sup>3</sup> The book, originally published in 1600, was a best-seller and helped form the liberal and independent thinkers of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century France. It was characterized as the *Essays* of Montaigne (1532-1592) set in order.<sup>4</sup> Charron's primary purpose for writing this work was to teach men how to become more human.<sup>5</sup> It expounds the preparation for wisdom, its foundations and its effects. It is not like the wisdom the theologians speak about, a wisdom which Charron describes as a wisdom made for the cloistered life, unattractive and unappealing. He wanted to reform men capable of living in the world and not the cloister. This wisdom can be achieved, in Charron's view, without religion. "Wisdom is necessary for piety, but one does not see that piety is necessary for wisdom," is the way one writer describes this work.<sup>6</sup>

According to Charron, the first preparation for wisdom is freedom - freedom from errors and prejudices which come from outside ourselves and from our passions which tyrannize us within. The second preparation is the art of preserving "a complete spirit of liberty" (*liberté d'esprit*) in our judgment and in our will. This spirit of freedom makes us open to all things and prevents us from becoming excessively attached to too many things. Here Charron echoes an idea that was dear to his mentor Erasmus and to Francis de Sales.

In stressing the aspects of human flourishing and the necessity for a spirit of freedom to achieve this, we can readily understand how Charron's work had such wide appeal and could hardly have escaped the notice of Francis de Sales. Although there does not appear to be a direct link between this work of Charron and Francis de Sales, many of the elements of Charron's thinking appear in the saint's writings and, especially, in the letter of 14 October 1604 to Jane, as this study intends to show.<sup>7</sup>

What is lacking in Charron's concept of freedom is the specific biblical dimension of human freedom or liberty that is not so much a freedom from something but a freedom for something. Sacred Scripture tells us that we have been shaped and drawn from the slime of the earth so that we can enter into a close, personal relationship with God. Hence, "only in freedom can there be a real relationship of love in which each of the lovers takes delight in the mystery of the other."<sup>8</sup> If we consider freedom in this light, then we can understand that, "Freedom is from God and for God. On its deepest level, it is the capacity and responsibility to be in loving relationship with God. It is the gift of love, the capacity for love and it finds its only true fulfillment in love."<sup>9</sup> Not only is it "the capacity and responsibility to be in loving relationship with God," but also with other human beings. So we are given the gift of freedom in order to be able to love - to love God above everything else and everything else in God.

### **Jane's Situation**

It is especially the relation of love to a spirit of liberty, which Francis championed and sets forth as a basic principle of his approach to spiritual direction that is the salient trait of this letter

because of the situation in which Jane found herself. As was obvious to Francis, we are not born free; we have to earn our freedom by the choices that we make in life. The choices we make determine the kind of human being we will become.

In the letter we are examining, Francis strives with great affection and sensitivity to show Jane how to free herself from religious scruples that were tying her up in knots and not allowing her to love the way that God was calling her to love. As a recent widow with three young children to raise, she yearned for a deeper spiritual life that would help her remain faithful to being a widow and to her vow of chastity. So she sought spiritual guidance from a religious in Dijon who was learned and pious but not very prudent. He saddled her with four vows. These obliged her to obey him, not to change directors, not to divulge anything he told her, and not to discuss her interior life with anyone else but him. As Elizabeth Stopp wisely observed, "Madame de Chantal agreed to burden her conscience with them all, thinking that her aversion came from her lack of virtue, not from her common sense. The door was open to scruples."<sup>10</sup>

Francis thought he had cleared up her scruples in a prior letter he had written to her. In that letter, he tries to assure her that when she went to confession to him, she in no way broke the vow she had made to her director. She thought she would be duplicitous in not telling her director that she had this encounter in spiritual matters with the Bishop of Geneva. He reassures her by reminding her that the Church allows us this freedom of conscience and explains: "Whatever is said in the secret of Confession is so sacred that it is not to be divulged outside of it. And whoever asks you if you said what you said under the seal of Confession, you reply without duplicity that you did not."<sup>11</sup>

A couple of months later, they had the fortuitous and memorable encounter at the gate of St. Claude where Jane made a general confession, agreed to have Francis as her spiritual director and sealed the three vows she made by giving them to him in writing.

### **Jane's Doubts Persist**

Shortly after this providential meeting at the gate of St. Claude, Jane wrote to Francis and again expressed, among other things, her doubts as to whether she made the right decision in choosing him as her spiritual director. We gather this from the saint's response since Jane's letter to him has not come down to us as is the case with most of the others she wrote to him.

Realizing full well that he had not sufficiently allayed Jane's scruples and doubts, he begins this missive with a brief prayer. "May it please our God to give me as much strength to make myself clearly understood in this letter as I have the desire to be."<sup>12</sup> He knows how difficult accurate communication is in human relationships and how easily we can be misunderstood, especially in writing when we cannot see the body language of the other, nor can the other ask for immediate clarification of any point. Friendships were for him the most dangerous kind of love because of this intercommunication. So he wants to make it known at the outset that he desires to be as clear as he can and that he needs the help of God's grace to do this.

The way in which he views the nature and importance of letter writing, particularly in spiritual matters, can help us appreciate how he approached and used this medium to reach and touch the

hearts of others. André Ravier tells us, “In reading his letters, we participate in a veritable transfiguration of human existence.”<sup>13</sup> A contemporary psychiatrist explains this transfiguration in this way: “It is impossible to understand another without making room for that person within yourself. This making room...requires an extension of and a changing of the self.”<sup>14</sup> This “transfiguration of human existence” is seen in the letter under study as well as other letters because, as Francis believed, correspondence is, by nature, self-revealing. A letter reveals the very soul or character of the letter writer as it is undergoing a “transfiguration.” Commenting in a letter to Antoine Favre about a letter he had just received from his former mentor and spiritual guide, Antonio Possevino, the saint remarks: “A letter is already a portrait of the one who writes, but the image of Possevino is so natural in his charming work *On Poetry and Painting* that, to represent and paint himself with so much grace and exactitude, he did not borrow his thoughts from others. He is almost as present to me in this writing as he would be in reality.”<sup>15</sup>

In a sense, Francis is saying, because a letter is self-revealing of the letter writer, it is the next best thing to being present to each other. This idea is expressed toward the end of the letter under consideration. Francis uses a very revealing expression. He urges Jane to help and assist the Abbess of Puits d'orbe and "visit her by letters." (*Aydes-la et la visites par lettres.*" 369). So letters dealing with spiritual matters are for him sacred encounters that partake of the mystery of the Visitation and are not merely means of communication.

Moreover, a letter should be conversational in tone. This is what he learned and practiced as a student at the Collège de Clermont. So he writes to Jane's father, “You want me, Sir, to continue on my part this conversation and on this subject by letters.”<sup>16</sup> In his classical studies at the Collège de Clermont in Paris, Francis learned the art of letter writing either by using Erasmus' *De conscribendis epistolis* or the manual of P. Voelle, *De ratione conscribendi Epistolas*, closely modeled after that of Erasmus.<sup>17</sup> The epistolary genre, following the example set by Cicero, was dialogic in nature. P. Voelle's manual called it “one half of a dialogue” or “a conversation of friends not present to each other” (*la “moitié d'un dialogue”* or *une “conversation des amis absents”*). However, the saint gives the impression that he is conversing and anticipates responses from the addressee in the letter. After he has told her about writing to her father and brother and advising her on raising her children, he says, “Well now, what more could you wish? Your father, brother, children – they are all infinitely dear to me.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Discerning the Right Choice**

Jane was literally bedeviled with two doubts. The first was her doubt about whether she made the right choice in asking Francis to be her spiritual guide, the other whether she had broken her vow by discussing her interior life with Francis. With regard to the first doubt, Francis attempts to allay her scruples by explaining how the decision was made, viz., they both prayed over it “for several months,” asked the advice of spiritual persons whose judgment they trusted. In this extremely important matter, Francis makes it clear that he did not want to follow “either her desire nor his inclination but only God and his providence.” They did not act impulsively but gave sufficient time to make the decision mature. All of these were indications that she made the right choice and made it freely. This was followed by a great consolation. In contrast, suggestions of the evil one are vacillating and vehement. (See 353-354).<sup>19</sup>

A word here is in order about the importance of divine providence in his life and thought since he tells us this is what they both wanted to follow in making this decision. Jane sheds light on the importance of divine providence in his life. She informs us, "he saw all things great and small as coming from divine providence in which he rested more peacefully than ever as a beloved child who lay on his mother's breast. He told us, too, that our Lord had taught him this lesson from his youth...."<sup>20</sup> This strong belief in divine providence helps explain his teaching on the *liberté d'esprit*, which was deepened and developed into his teaching on Holy Indifference. Also, it contributed to his conviction that God would provide him with all the insight he would need to guide Jane and later led him to conclude that God provides this light to all spiritual directors.<sup>21</sup>

With regard to the second doubt, he uses a different approach by assuring her of his great affection for her, a very special affection that God has placed in his heart to serve her. It moves him to confide in her his deepest feelings for her:

When you spoke to me more openly I felt my love for your soul grow in a wonderful way and this made me write that God had given me to you. I could not, I think, have added to my affection for you in any way, especially when I was praying for you. But now my dear daughter, a new quality has been added to which I do not seem to be able to give a name; I can only describe it by its effect which is a great interior sweetness that I feel in wishing you perfect love of God and all other spiritual blessings. Every affection differs in some particular way from every other. My affection for you has a special quality which consoles me infinitely, and if all were said, is of great profit to me.... I did not want to speak as openly as this but one word leads to another, besides, I feel you will know how to take it.<sup>22</sup>

Jane's openness causes Francis to open his heart to her. In a very real sense, while helping to free her for love, he also frees himself for greater love by a willingness to share it. This exemplifies to an extraordinary degree the reciprocity and intercommunication that takes place on the deepest level in spiritual friendships. One writer aptly describes this mutuality in this way: "The more I nurture the spiritual growth of others, the more my own spiritual growth is nurtured."<sup>23</sup> In assisting Jane, Francis begins to experience the depths of his capacity for and freedom to love and to express this love. It makes him freer to love.

### **Developing 'the Capacity for the Other**

In helping Jane to deal with her scruple about confiding in him, Francis places their relationship in a spousal, ecclesial context:

Another thing to consider, my daughter, is this: the holy Church of God, imitating her Spouse, does not teach us to pray only for ourselves but always for ourselves and our fellow Christians, in the plural: 'Give us' and 'grant us' and many similar terms of this kind. When using this general form of speech I had never before thought more particularly of any one person. Since I went to Dijon several people who asked for my prayers come to my mind when I say this word 'we', yourself

almost invariably first among them; and when you are not first, which is rare, so that I have time to dwell on the thought of you. Can I say more than that?"<sup>24</sup>.

He realizes that he might be going too far and can be easily misunderstood. So he asks her not to communicate this to others. Nevertheless, by sharing what was deep in his heart, he was wittingly winning her heart because, as he was wont to say, "heart speaks to heart."<sup>25</sup> By framing the relationship in terms of the prayer of the Church, he is expressing a firm conviction of how the ecclesial communion develops our "capacity for the other."<sup>26</sup> It certainly was deepening his awareness of others and especially of Jane. In the previous letter he wrote to her, he urged her to be a loyal daughter of the Church. "Next to the love of Our Lord I commend to you love of his holy bride, the Church, that gentle dove which alone is able to rear true fledglings for her bridegroom. Praise God a hundred times a day for making you a daughter of the Church, following the example of Mother Teresa [St. Theresa of Avila] who found great comfort in repeating this often at the hour of her death."<sup>27</sup>

In mentioning Jesus as the Spouse of the Church, Francis is evoking the love story of the Song of Songs, which he, along with many others, understood on one level as the love of the bride, the Church, for the bridegroom, Jesus. We know the great influence this short book of Scripture had in shaping his spirituality and the great debt he expressed in the *Treatise* to the Benedictine Gilbert Générard, whose course on the Song of Songs he took in Paris.<sup>28</sup> One scripture scholar reflects on the impact the Song had in helping Francis understand women and their spiritual needs and capacities. "Perhaps it was his immersion in the perspective and language of the Song that taught Francis to appreciate and value the voice of women as a source of religious insight. It sensitized him and helped him to develop his unique gifts in advising women who sought his guidance."<sup>29</sup> So while ostensibly confiding in Jane on how much more he feels connected to her and others when praying, he is also causing her to reflect on and deepen her "capacity for others."

### **Dealing With Temptations**

Francis considered the scruples Jane was experiencing as temptations from the devil and tells her "to laugh at their author and spit in his face."<sup>30</sup> This is rather strong language from the gentle saint. Nonetheless, by helping Jane develop her "capacity for the other," he was subtly but effectively preparing her to do battle with the other temptations she was having because this disposition naturally takes our minds off of ourselves and helps them focus on the needs of others.

In responding to her request for advice on the temptations she was experiencing against faith and the Church, he proposes two remedies which form the basis of his advice on temptations in the *Introduction to a Devout Life*.<sup>31</sup> Jane appears to have been tortured by temptations against faith and the Church. Although we do not know the specific nature of these temptations, the remark that Jane makes later hints at what they might have been: "I was told by someone who had battled for two long years with strong temptations against belief in the Blessed Sacrament that she was delivered of her doubts the first time she spoke to him [Francis]; and my own state of mind after years of a similar struggle did not improve until he instructed me, and I firmly believe

that his prayers have now completely delivered me."<sup>32</sup> It is very likely from this testimony that Jane's doubts about faith centered on the real presence in the Eucharist.<sup>33</sup>

Francis proposed two remedies for dealing with her temptations. The first is not to face them squarely but to turn our minds away from them. When the evil one knocks at the door, we should not go to see who is there. As long as we hear the knocking, no matter how loud it may be, it is sign that he has not entered. (355). The other remedy is not to dispute with the devil, but rather to make acts of love and faith. In this way, we turn times of temptation into occasions for expressing our love for God and his Church. He says this very explicitly: "it will give you the occasion for exercising a thousand virtuous affections." (356). To help distract her from her temptations, he recommends the moderate use of the discipline. He then consoles her by pointing out that Sacred Scripture assures us that these can be moments of blessedness. (357).

Jane learned the lesson well and later taught this method of dealing with temptations to the Visitandines. "...We have to practice the advice of our Blessed Father," she says, "which is admirable in this matter. 'Speak to God about other things and do not dispute at all with the temptation, but go to God by simply turning our mind away from it.'"<sup>34</sup> We get further insight on how she handled temptations against faith by marveling at the mysteries of nature. One day she was observing for a long time a bee taking the nectar from a flower and could not understand how it was able to then transfer it from its little mouth to its legs and bring it to the honeycomb. She makes this reflection: "How miserable we mortals are! If we cannot understand what these little creatures do, why would we want to understand what God does. Ah! It seems to me (may the glory of it be to the author of all good) that when I know that God or the Church has said something, I believe it more than that I have two eyes in my head."<sup>35</sup>

In assisting Jane to deal successfully with her temptations, he was freeing her to love more deeply, and she, in turn, was able to help free others for love. Francis' approach here is extremely positive and encouraging. Sensitive souls like Jane's, when struggling with temptations, may be inclined to think that there must be something wrong with them to experience such strong negative feelings, feelings that can result in a poor self-image. He will later make it clear that there is a vast difference between feeling a temptation and consenting to it.<sup>36</sup>

### Advice on Prayer

He proposes that she meditate according to the method he had previously given her in writing and focus on the Passion and death of our Lord. This method is essentially the same as the one he sets forth in Part 2 of the *Devout Life*. What is very striking about the advice Francis gives Jane on vocal prayer is the ecclesial dimension. In addition to mental prayer, he asks her to recite daily a number of vocal prayers: *Pater, Ave, Credo, Veni Creator*, etc. in Latin and to salute all of the saints, to pray for the dead as well as the "living faithful." "In this fashion, you will have visited the whole Church." ( 358]. Here again we see the telling word or verb "*visiter*" which conveys a depth of meaning and richness in the context of the communion of saints. In effect, he was initiating her into a spirituality of communion and strengthening her awareness of her solidarity with all of the faithful. Stopp points out Jane's need for public worship: "There was a chapel at Bourbilly where daily Mass was celebrated, but Jane insisted on going to Mass at the

local parish church 'putting forth the argument of good example, and because, as she put it, 'it gave her a very special sort of satisfaction to worship God together with all the faithful.'"<sup>37</sup>

In the evening before supper, Francis suggests that she center her thoughts and prayers around the five wounds of Christ: "You can do this spiritual retirement by placing yourself into one of the five wounds of our Lord for five days, on the sixth day, the crown of thorns and on the seventh day, in the pierced side. For you need to begin the week in this way and finish in the same way, i.e., on Sundays come back to the heart." ( 358). Francis does not say why she must begin this practice with the pierced heart of Jesus on Sunday and return to it on Sunday. A number of the Fathers taught that the Church was born of the pierced heart of Jesus. Father Abruzzese notes: "Related to this theme is the image of the Church as the bride of the crucified Christ, a theme which focuses on the symbol of the heart."<sup>38</sup> By recommending this practice, Francis is acquainting her with the unfathomable riches of this wounded heart and helping Jane deepen her love and loyalty to the Church by resting her heart on the wounded heart of Jesus.<sup>39</sup> We see here that early on devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus helps to form the spiritual life of the future foundress of the Visitation

Even though Francis specifies a number of prayers she should say and when she should say them, he does not want her to be constrained by them, especially when her duties as mother and head of the household do not leave her much leisure. This is precisely where her former spiritual director erred and lacked a good deal of prudence and common sense. When you have a Philothea such as Jane so intent on doing what needs to be done to become holy, there is the danger of becoming scrupulous. And so he says to her, "If you happen to omit or forget anything that I tell you to do, have no scruples about it, for here is the general rule of our obedience written in capital letters: LOVE AND NOT FORCE SHOULD INSPIRE ALL YOU DO; LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE."<sup>40</sup>

It is from this principle that he derives another essential aspect of his spirituality - "a spirit of freedom" which, as noted above, had such a strong attraction for the people of his day. However, most people like Charron would look upon this as a freedom from the restraints of error or ignorance or any presumptive truth. Francis takes it much farther than Charron and his contemporaries. This spirit of freedom arises from the awareness that we are loved by God as his children. He sees it not so much as a freedom from but a freedom for, a freedom for loving. As noted above, we are given the gift of freedom so that we can love God and others in God. So a spirit of freedom is the freedom to love in the fullest Christian sense of the word and not simply an intellectual detachment.

Of course, this freedom and ability to love comes from the Passion, death and resurrection of Our Lord. This is why Francis wants Jane to center her meditations on these sacred mysteries so as to deepen her love for the Lord and thereby also deepen her freedom to love. We will learn how to love or be totally free in our loving by looking intently on the incomparable love of Jesus in his moment of greatest pain and feeling of rejection and abandonment. The importance of meditating on the four last things (sin, death, heaven and hell) must not leave us discouraged but encouraged. This is why we should always end with an act of courage. This readily explains the later arrangement of the meditations in Part I of the *Devout Life* and why he urges that they be done in the order in which he has given them.<sup>41</sup> The arrangement stresses his spirit of optimism.

Before elaborating on the idea of a spirit of freedom, Francis digresses to give Jane advice on mortifications, the reception of Holy Communion and on raising her children.

Although he does approve of her fasting on certain days and the taking of the discipline in moderation, he prefers that, rather than cutting down on the amount of food, she mortify her choice. He does not give his reason for this here, but, from the tenor of the whole letter and his approach to mortifications, he evidently sees the giving up of our choice as demanding much more from us as we later learn from the *Devout Life*.<sup>42</sup> These practices of austerity can bring the body (sister ass, “*l’asnesse*” and not ‘brother ass’ as it is frequently translated) under control so that it can be more open to love, more open to do what God wants and not what we want. (360). Wendy Wright has insightfully expressed the reason for Salesian discipline when she notes, “At their root all of these practices seek to open the heart so that the whole person, in thought, intent and deed will become utterly responsive to the most subtle fluctuations of the divine breath.”<sup>43</sup>

### **The Church in Human Encounters**

Reiterating what he had previously advised her on receiving the Holy Eucharist frequently, which was very unusual in that day, he admits that he experiences “a special consolation on feast days knowing that we are both receiving communion together.” (360). A brief reflection on this admission can give us deeper insights into the nature of his relationship to Jane and the role of the Church and this sacrament, in particular, plays.

Why did Francis experience such a great consolation in thinking of Jane when he received Holy Communion? In his previous letter of 5 May 1604, he commends and asks her to be a loyal daughter of the Church, which he envisioned early on as the assembly of love.<sup>44</sup> His conception of the Church in this passage is basically biblical. The word “assembly” is widely used in liturgical circles today because it designates very well the nature of the Church. It is precisely this word that the saint purposely chooses to make us understand better the unique character of the Church. The Christian Church is made up of people “assembled by the Word of God”, called into existence by love and maintained in existence by love, which is the true “cement that holds together the living stones of the Church.”<sup>45</sup>

The Church makes these relationships possible. It creates, facilitates, nurtures, sustains and deepens these encounters. Jane and Francis, at the moment of receiving the Holy Eucharist are in the embrace of Jesus, the Whole Christ, head and members. Remembrance of Jane while Francis receives Holy Communion demonstrates the necessary ecclesial dimension of spiritual friendships because they are rooted in the sacramental embrace of Jesus and in the communal life of the Blessed Trinity. “The saint’s studies with the Benedictine [Gilbert Générard] oriented his thought toward the Christological dimensions of the Church, for Générard does not understand the sacraments merely as external rites devoid of all warmth and feeling. On the contrary, he conceives of them as the dynamic and affectionate actions of Christ in his Church. He compares them to the loving embrace that Christ gives to his spouse when interpreting verse 2,6 of the Canticle: ‘his left arm is under my head and his right embraces me.’”<sup>46</sup> Without explicitly advertent to this idea, it must have been in the back of Francis’ mind as he reflected on this experience. In a sermon delivered in Lent, 1618, he explicitly states that Jesus became incarnate:

“To unite us so perfectly with Himself as to make us one with Him. Our Lord did this to teach us that we are all loved with the same love by which He embraces us all in this Most Holy Sacrament, so He wishes us all to love one another with that same love, a love which tends toward union, but a union greater and more perfect than can be conceived.”<sup>47</sup> In the embrace of Jesus, the Jesus of faith, the body of Christ, there is a prolongation and a deepening of the understanding of the original encounter, a profound understanding of ‘Living Jesus,’ of being in communion with others through our communion with Jesus, the Whole Christ.

Before taking leave of each other after the meeting at St. Claude, which is mentioned in this letter (369), Francis gave Jane some written advice, that later became part of the Spiritual Directory. In addition to thoughts on rising, dressing, assisting at Mass, he advises her, “after Communion, contemplate our Lord seated on your heart, have come before him, one after the other, your senses and your faculties, to hear his commandments and to promise him fidelity.”<sup>48</sup> This is reminiscent of the practice of swearing or taking an oath of fealty to one’s feudal Lord. More importantly, there is, if you will, a very fleshly and incarnational character to this Eucharistic encounter which stresses the special body contact that takes place in the Eucharist, the body not as a entity separate from the soul but rather the very locus of this miraculous encounter. This is perhaps why Francis experiences in the depth of his being the reverberation of the initial encounter with Jane at Dijon and at St. Claude with such intensity at the moment of receiving the Body of Christ.

### **Weaving the Web of the Love of Friendships**

The practical advice that Francis feels free to give to both her Father, her brother and to Jane about raising both Celse Bénigne and Françoise gives evidence of how he wove a wonderful web of friendships with the relatives of those with whom he formed spiritual friendships. He professes a special love, a dilection for all of her children. (360). The French word ‘*dilection*’ is extremely evocative. For in the letter immediately prior to this one, he explains that the bond that exists between Jane and him is the bond of love, of Christian friendship, and asserts that it is one that stands the test of time and is immortal. He then quotes from the Song of Songs and elaborates on the freedom that this love of dilection entails:

‘Love [dilection] is as strong as death and as firm as hell,’ [Song 8:6] says Solomon. So there, dear sister (allow me to call you by this name, which is the one used by the apostles and the first Christians to express the intimate love they had for one another), this is our bond, these are our chains which, the more they are tightened and press against us, the more they bring us joy and freedom. Their strength is gentleness; their violence, mildness; nothing is more pliable than that; nothing stronger. Think of me as very closely bound to you, and don’t try to understand more about it than that this bond is not opposed to any other bond either of a vow or marriage. Be totally at peace on that score.<sup>49</sup>

The word that is translated as love is the word “dilection” which for Francis, knowing its Latin root, was a love of choice or the choicest love, a love he later describes as love of election.<sup>50</sup> Dilection is the word for him that conveys the inextricable relationship between love and freedom as he so clearly expresses it above. So in saying that he had a love of dilection for her

children, he was including them in this same bond of Christian or spiritual friendship. This clearly reveals that he did not see spiritual friendship as exclusive and excluding but as preferential and expansive.

In raising her children, he urges her to employ the method the angels use with us, namely, 'gentle encouragement' or 'inspiring gentleness.' ("*des inspirations soûfves*," 361). This approach was intended to have them respond both lovingly and freely, thereby more inclined to interiorize the values she wanted to inculcate in them. Unfortunately, the effects of this method were not immediately discernible in the case of Celse Bénigne, who was headstrong, and Françoise, who was rather vain and frivolous. Later when Jane was particularly distraught about Celse-Bénigne's behavior as a courtier, Francis wrote: "I am most distressed to hear about your affliction.... My very dear Mother, mortal life is full of such happenings, and the pangs of childbirth often last a good deal longer than midwives realize."<sup>51</sup>

Francis recommends that Jane divide her time between her father's household at Bourbilly and her father-in-law's at Montheleon. The stay at the latter was pure torture for Jane, because her father-in-law was so demanding, and the housekeeper, whom he kept as a mistress, made life miserable for her. Here again, he urged her to help them grow spiritually and to do it by using the same method he advised for raising her children – gentle encouragement. (361).

### **Spirit of Freedom**

After advising Francis about her children, and telling her of the assistance he gave her father and brother, he turns his attention to explaining more fully what he means by a spirit of freedom or liberty. (362-367). It is the "freedom of children who are loved.... It is a detachment of the Christian heart from all things in order to follow the known will of God." (363). The Our Father is the perfect prayer for expressing and disposing us for this spirit of freedom. For every time we ask that the Father's name be sanctified, for his kingdom to come and his will to be done, we are praying for a spirit of freedom. To see in this prayer the embodiment of a spirit of freedom is to make us appreciate it in a new and refreshing light.

Francis, as an experienced and very perceptive spiritual director at a relatively young age, knew how readily our hearts can become attached to things to give us some security, some stability to our lives. This is particularly true for those who are eager to deepen their spiritual lives. The consolations they experience in prayer easily become a source of attachments which can readily get in the way of following God's will, of being open to please God rather than ourselves. It is not wrong to want these consolations, but it is inhibiting to be attached to them. The same thing applies to our religious exercises. They can become a security blanket for us that make us insensitive or unresponsive to God's voice when he speaks to us through charity, the needs of others or through obedience. He makes it clear that Jane is to avoid two opposite extremes – slavishness and fickleness. The former makes us rigid and inflexible in spiritual matters and the latter leads to laxness and irresponsibility. (364-365). Hence they do not free us for love. He then proceeds to give three examples of people who were exemplary in the way they practiced this spirit of freedom, above all St. John the Baptist, who knew that the Lord was nearby and yet did not go to see him but stuck to his preaching since he saw this as God's will for him. The degree of detachment exhibited by this great saint leaves Francis dumbfounded: "Is this not a

completely detached spirit, detached even from God himself so as to do his will and serve him, to leave God for God, and not to love God in order to love him better?”<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

This study in no way pretends to exhaust the richness and depth of Francis de Sales’ teaching in this letter. The reason is that it reveals the many aspects of his spirituality as it is germinating and unfolding and profoundly sows the seeds of his relational spirituality, a spirituality of communion that is incomprehensible if not rooted in the communal life of the Church. It is a life to be lived in freedom and love with and for others, one that views human encounters as great possibilities for prolonging the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Visitation that invite us to view freedom as a call to love, as a responsiveness and an unwavering attachment to the will of God.

We see in this letter that the saint’s notion of a spirit of liberty contains the seeds of several of his teachings. Among them are (1) living between the two wills of God, (2) holy indifference, and (3) “Ask for nothing, refuse nothing.” As a matter of fact, the connection between a spirit of freedom and these teachings is explicitly made by St. Jane herself, who elaborates several times in her instructions to the sisters on the theme of a “*liberté d’esprit*.”<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, space does not permit us to delve more deeply into this question. However, given the temper of our age and its great attraction to freedom and liberty, this letter suggests that the saint’s teachings on living between the two wills of God and on holy indifference might be more palatable and comprehensible if presented in terms of a spirit of freedom as Francis de Sales originally did.

A very striking quality of Francis’ spiritual direction is a collaborative spirit. This spirit is very evident in this letter. At the very early stages of their relationship and not too long after their initial encounter, he enlists her cooperation and collaboration in several areas. Knowing what demands Jane was facing in dividing her time between two households, Francis, nonetheless, asks for her cooperation in nurturing the spiritual growth not only of her father to whom he had given spiritual guidance, but also that of her difficult and demanding father-in-law. Furthermore, he recommends that she support and help her friend Anne Bourgeois, Abbess of Puits d’Orbe, in reforming her monastery, a project that he had previously undertaken. This note of collaboration gives a precious insight into the way Francis viewed spiritual direction and the mutuality and reciprocity it necessarily involves. These early cooperative undertakings set the stage for the future collaborative effort in founding and establishing the Visitation Sisters. It is not the only model of collaboration among the sexes in the Church but certainly one of the most exemplary and best documented. Hence it has served and continues to serve as a model in human relationships not only for the Church but for humanity. It reminds us of what God intended to be “in the beginning.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales, Edition Complète* (Annecy: Monastère de la Visitation, 1892-1964), XII, 352-370. Hereinafter designated as OEA.

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<sup>22</sup> “The effect of liberty to individuals is that they may do what they please: we ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations, which may be soon turned into complaints.” Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the French Revolution* (The Harvard Classics) 1909–14. Paras. 1–24.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre de Charron, *De La Sagesse* (Paris: Chassériau, 1820,) 3 vols.

<sup>4</sup> J. B. Sabrié, *De l’humanisme au rationalisme: Pierre Charron (1541-1603): L’homme, l’oeuvre, l’influence* (Paris: Alcon, 1913), 271.

<sup>5</sup> See Charron, vol. 1, xlii. The Incarnation makes wisdom accessible to us and can make us a, “homme sage qui sait bien et excellement faire l’homme.”

<sup>6</sup> Fortunat Strowski, *Saint François de Sales* (Paris: Plon, 1898), 31. All translations from the French are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> See Alexander Pocetto, *Saint François de Sales et les libertins érudits*, 1970. Unpublished thesis. Université Laval, 124-126.

<sup>8</sup> John Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Sachs, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Stopp, *Madame de Chantal: Portrait of a Saint* (Stella Niagara, NY: DeSales Resource Center, 2002), 47.

<sup>11</sup> OEA, 12, 286, Letter of 24 June 1604.

<sup>12</sup> OEA, 12, 352, Letter of 14 October 1604. Hereafter page numbers referring to the original French of this letter will be cited in parentheses.

<sup>13</sup> “A lire ses lettres, nous participons à une véritable transfiguration de l’existence humaine.” André Ravier, *Correspondence: Les lettres d’amitié spirituelle* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1980), 763.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 149.

<sup>15</sup> “Epistola per se scribentis quaedam effigies manualis est at in selecto illo libello de *Poësi et Pictura*, tam genuina est Possevini effigies, ut non in messem alienam miserit manum qui tam eleganter et graphicae seipsum repraesentariet et pinxerit, ac nihilo fere minus se libello mihi praesentem exhibeat quam ipsissima praesenti tibi.” OEA, 10, 122-123.

<sup>16</sup> In the letter to Jane’s father referring to the letters he sent to his son, to his brother and to Jane, OEA, 12, 327, 7 October 1604.

<sup>17</sup> See Viviane Mellinghoff-Bourgerie, *François de Sales, Un homme de lettres spirituelles* (Geneva: Droz, 1999), 163.

<sup>18</sup> *St. Francis de Sales: Selected Letters*, trans. by Elizabeth Stopp (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 70. OEA, 12, 362.

<sup>19</sup> We see here essentially the short method for knowing God’s will he later sets forth in the *Treatise*, Bk. 8, ch. 14.

<sup>20</sup> *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal*, trans., ed. with an introduction by Elizabeth Stopp (Hyattsville, MD: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967), Letter to Jean Goulu, 168.

<sup>21</sup> See OEA, 3, 22-25.

<sup>22</sup> Stopp, *Selected Letters*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Peck, 160.

<sup>24</sup> Stopp, *Selected Letters*, 64.

<sup>25</sup> OEA, 12, 321, Letter to Archbishop Fremyot, 5 October 1604. “le coeur parle au coeur, et la langue ne parle qu’aux oreilles.”

<sup>26</sup> “Among the fundamental values linked to women’s lives is what has been called a ‘capacity for the other’. . . . women preserve the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other.” Congregation of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” Rome, May 31, 2004 (13).

<sup>27</sup> Stopp, *Selected Letters*, 53. OEA, 12, 266.

<sup>28</sup> See OEA, V, 277.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Ceresko, OSFS, “The Interpretation in the Song of Songs in St. Francis de Sales; How a Saint Learned the Lessons of Love.” *Salesianum*, 66 (2004):49.

<sup>30</sup> Stopp, *Selected Letters*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> OEA, 3, 304-305.

<sup>32</sup> Testimony, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Stopp does not mention this possibility in her work on the *Selected Letters* apparently because this work was published before the *Testimony*.

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<sup>34</sup> *Doctrine spirituelle de Sainte Jeanne-Françoise de Chantal, Fondatrice de la Visitation*, ed. with an introduction by R.P. Mezard, O.P., 2e ed. (Paris: Monastère de la Visitation, 1980), 51.

<sup>35</sup> Mezard, 85.

<sup>36</sup> “Sentire n’est pas consentir.” OEA, 3, 294-297.

<sup>37</sup> Stopp, *Portrait*, 35-36.

<sup>38</sup> John Abruzzese, *The Theology of Hearts in the Writings of St. Francis de Sales*, (Rome: Pontifical University of St. Thomas, 1985), 46-48.

<sup>39</sup> On the significance of the Pierced Heart, see Abruzzese, 148-162.

<sup>40</sup> Stopp, *Selected Letters*, 67.

<sup>41</sup> See OEA, 3, 33.

<sup>42</sup> See OEA, 3, ch. 23.

<sup>43</sup> “‘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. by Annice Callahan, R.S.C.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 147.

<sup>44</sup> After emphasizing that the word “Church (*Eglise*) comes from the Greek word, which means to call” and “signifies an assembly or company of people called,” he contrasts the Church with the Jewish synagogue. “The assembly of the Jews was called a synagogue, that of the Christians is called a Church.... Christians are assembled together in the union of charity by the preaching of the Apostles and their successors.” OEA, 1, 42-43.

<sup>45</sup> OEA, 1, 49.

<sup>46</sup> Gilbert Genebrard, *Canticum canticorum Salomonis et commentariis* (Parisii. A.E. Gorbinum, 1585), “*Gestibus amplexantis per dextram et sinistram significat signa conjunctionibus Christi cum Ecclesia, ut verbum, sacramenta et caetera externa, quibus tanquam pietatis renaculis suos in quadam vitae communionem continet. Me his, inquit, cunctis modis fovebit et sustentabit*, p. 37. As noted in Alexander Pocetto, *Ecclesial Dimensions of Salesian Thought* (Hyattsville, MD: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1971), 3.

<sup>47</sup> *The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales*, trans. by the Nuns of the Visitation, ed. by Lewis S. Fiorelli, OSFS, (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1987), 95-96.

<sup>48</sup> OEA, 26, 192.

<sup>49</sup> *Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, trans. by Sr. Péronne Marie, VHM, with an introduction by Joseph Power, OSFS, and Wendy Wright (New York: Paulist Press, 1988) 127-128. Letter of 24 June 1604 to Jane, OEA, 12, 285.

<sup>50</sup> See OEA, 9, 193, where he states that dilection is “un amour d’élection.”

<sup>51</sup> OEA, 17, 332, Letter of Jan. 1619 as cited by Stopp, 199.

<sup>52</sup> Stopp, *Selected Letters*, 74.

<sup>53</sup> In the instruction “Des fondements de la solide vertu,” she explicitly ties the teaching of *la liberté d’esprit* to detachment and holy indifference and relates it also to the saint’s conference on the well-known saying, “Ne demandez rien et ne refusez rien” because, among other virtues, il “contient encore la parfaite dépendance du bon plaisir de Dieu....” Mezard, 49.

<sup>54</sup> See Congregation of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” Rome, May 31, 2004.