

Salesian Spirituality

St Francis de Sales (1567-1622) felt called to the priesthood at an early age, but studied law instead to please his noble father. His decision to enter the priesthood came after he was riding one day. He fell off his horse three times in one day, and each time he fell, his sword and scabbard fell off and landed on the ground to form a cross. After the third time he decided that he must tell his father that he was joining the priesthood.



As a young priest Francis lived in an area that was heavily populated by Calvinists. His mission was to educate them about the Catholic Church and bring as many as he could back into the Catholic fold. His parents, for the most part, would not listen to Francis, but he would play with the children, and seeing his kind humility, the parents began to hear his message of love. When people closed their doors on him, he began writing out the teachings of the church on pieces of paper and sliding the papers under the doors (the first known instance of ministering in this way) and people would read them. It is thought that because of his efforts and patience 40,000 people returned to the Catholic Church because of Francis alone.

One day Francis was preaching to a large group of people and he saw in the crowd a woman who had previously appeared to him in a dream: **Jane Frances de Chantal** (1572-1641). After her mother's death when she was 18 months old, Jane was raised by her father and at 20 married the Baron of Chantal. Jane managed the baron's estates and provided alms and care to all of the neighbors. When she was 28, her husband died in a hunting accident, leaving Jane alone to care for her four children. At her father's encouragement, Jane had travelled from her father-in-law's estate specifically to hear the new bishop speak. After that meeting, Jane and Francis began to develop a spiritual friendship which lasted throughout their lives.



Jane began dividing her time between her father's house and her father-in-law's house so that she could help care for both of them. Later, Jane's daughter married Francis' youngest brother. After the death of Francis' mother, Jane moved to Chantal so that she could help her daughter care for her children. Throughout this whole time Jane and Francis' spiritual connection grew both in person, and through a series of letters which they wrote to each other.

In 1610, Francis and Jane founded the *Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary*. Unlike other women's religious orders of the time, the sisters did not spend their time cloistered, but rather lived active lives, seeing the works of their order as a public ministry. Francis was finally pressured into cloistering the community, but they continued to work in a way that integrated them with the community. This order accepted all women, many were denied from other religious orders because of their age or their health, but Jane was not young herself and saw no reason why others like her should not be allowed to live a religious life.

Many of Jane and Francis' letters have been published and this collection serves as an example of spiritual direction and spiritual companionship which have nourished the prayer life of the church for centuries.

Prayer Activity: Spiritual Direction

As you may know, Spiritual Direction is not an activity that you can just try out over the next two weeks. Instead, let this activity serve as an invitation to hold the possibility of spiritual direction in your prayer. Some people seek out spiritual direction during a specific time in their life: while discerning an upcoming change, in a stressful time, while completing the SEEL exercises, etc. Some, however, find the practice of spiritual direction nourishes their prayer life regardless of external circumstances.

Reading Assignment: Chapters 6 and 20