

## *Revolution in Charity*

### Chapter Five

#### THE ORDER OF THE VISITATION

During Lent, 1604, the Bishop of Geneva was invited to preach in Dijon. It was there that he met Madame de Chantal.

She was the daughter of Andre Fremyot, President of the Parliament of Dijon; even in her childhood people had remarked on her piety and steadfast faith. She had been very happily married, but her husband had died young of a hunting accident, leaving her with three children. The blow was almost more than she could bear. The consolations of her family and friends were singularly ineffective. In her bereavement, the impulse to live for God alone, from which she had been distracted before, assumed an ever greater dominance in her spirit. She had always possessed the gift of prayer, but now she began to devote herself to it. It seemed to her that she needed a spiritual guide; the choice she made was both hasty and unfortunate. She soon found herself embroiled in a mass of exterior exercises, each of which was to be executed punctiliously. Nor was her life on the estate of her father-in-law a particularly happy one. Not only was the old gentleman of an irascible temper; he also had an ambitious housekeeper. She scarcely knew any longer where to turn when, in 1604, her father invited her to spend Lent with him in Dijon. There she met Francis de Sales.

She was immediately impressed by his sermons, but she hesitated to place herself under his direction because she was bound by a vow of obedience to her previous director. After some months, with the counsel of De Sales, she overcame her scruples. Under his conduct, mysticism for her gradually changed from a potentiality to actual fact. Gone were the old restraints of dry regimentation. The Bishop of Geneva wrote to her: "Let your heart be free...and provided that the love of God in your desire and his glory your intention, live always joyfully and courageously."

Jane de Chantal's new devotion manifested itself in her daily activity. While she was married, the work of piety to which she had been most attentive had been charity towards the poor of the countryside. In times of famine she had converted her poultry-yard into a soup-kitchen, where she herself served the peasants, some of whom came from villages six or seven leagues distant. She, moreover, sent supplies of bread secretly to formerly prosperous families who were ashamed to beg.

After the death of her husband, however, and especially after Francis de Sales had begun to teach her, her charity took on greater proportions. Having asked leave of her father-in-law, she fitted out a little room as a dispensary. Poor peasants afflicted with sores and wounds of all sorts came to her from miles around, and she insisted on applying the dressings and ointments with her own hands. Every day she would make the rounds of the sick in the village nearest the estate,

cleaning the patients, fixing their beds, bringing medicines to them, consoling the dying, and clothing the dead. In her spare time she washed and mended the rags of those who sought her help. Among the poor who were homeless and wandered from one village to another, there were always some too ill to go on—people suffering from fevers, or cancer, or even leprosy. These she ordered to be directed to her house, where she nursed them.

All this was done to the great scandal of her late husband's relatives. They could understand how a widow who led a life of prayer, but to infest the house with revolting creatures! They argued that she could spend her time more honorably waiting on her father-in-law, but she pointed out that he had servants to wait on him, while the poor would have no one if she forsook them. Their strongest point, however, was the health of her children. President Fremyot was persuaded to order his daughter to stop nursing people with infectious diseases. Francis de Sales was in agreement; he advised her to be prudent, although he was very pleased to hear that she was doing nursing. She did, in fact, catch a severe case of dysentery in 1606, while working to stop an epidemic on one of her estates. Madame de Chantal, moreover, taught the village children and, during her visits to Dijon, she enlisted her father's cooperation in expediting judicial procedure of the poor.

As the years passed she felt an increasing desire to withdraw from the world and devote herself exclusively to God. She confided her thoughts to Francis de Sales; they coincided with a dream of his own. As Bishop of Geneva, he has come in contact with every Order in Savoy; he had worked to reform some monastic houses, and had given spiritual advice to the Superiors of others. He had high esteem both for the contemplative Carmelites and the practical Ursulines. Yet there was no Order, as far as he could see, that supremely represented the union between contemplative and active Charity. He knew many women, moreover, who wanted to leave the world but were physically incapable of living under an austere monastic discipline. He proposed to found a Congregation that would fill both needs. After having duly tested Madame de Chantal's resolution therefore, he invited her, in 1610, to come to Annecy to establish the new Institute.

She has severe contentions with her family over this matter, but since her children were well provided for and her business affairs were in perfect order, she was able to overcome the opposition.

Thus, in June 1610, Jane Frances de Chantal, together with three companions, entered the novitiate. There was some controversy as to the name which the foundation would bear. The people, impressed with the modesty of the Sisters, called them the *Saintes-Maries*; Francis de Sales first called them the Daughters of Saint Martha and then the Oblate Sisters of the Holy Virgin. It was finally agreed upon that the Institute be called the Congregation of the Visitation of Holy Mary, commemorating the visit of Mary to Elizabeth and thus symbolizing the spiritual and practical aims of the Sisters.

The Visitation was not, in the beginning, a religious Order, but a Congregation, that is, it lived without enclosure of solemn public vows and by its own Rule instead of the Augustinian one. It was to receive infirm as well as robust novices, “in order to put into practice this sacred: Carry one another’s burdens, and thus you will fulfill the law of Jesus Christ.” Though the physical discipline was less severe than in other Orders, the spiritual requirements more than compensated for it. According to Saint Jane de Chantal, the essence of the Institute was to be “a death of nature...a perfection of love...based on...solid and true virtues: profound humility, tender charity, cordial patience, prompt and simple obedience...attention to the presence of God.” The Sisters were to remember that they had been called to religion not merely for their personal sanctification, but “in order that we may serve him in holiness and justice all the days of our lives; in order that we may pray for his people, for our good Christian brothers, for this dear neighbor who suffers so much, that it is intolerable to hear his calamities recounted.” They could not hope to enter the heavenly Temple “except by the sole door of Charity, which opens in two wings: Love of God and Love of Man.”

The contemplative side of their life was to represent the portion of Mary, but Mary was not to despise the humbler, more practical Martha. To this end, the Sisters not only nursed and consoled the sick among their number and took turns doing the housework, but went in pairs about the city, serving the sick in the spirit of Christ. The patients were generally women; men were nursed only in exceptionally grave cases. Although there was nothing to prevent the Sisters from caring for prosperous people, especially if they were benefactors of the Visitation, preference was always given to the destitute. Mother Chantal and Sister Favre were the first to make the rounds of the city; the others Sisters were assiduous in following their example.

The first years of the Visitation were quiet ones. Although the house was poor, the lives of the nuns were “loving, interior, peaceful and very edifying.” They were happy in serving the poor. Francis de Sales practically acted as master of novices, visiting them as often as possible and discoursing on points of the Rule as well as their personal problems. Duke Charles-Emmanuel had approved the Congregation and his daughter, the Duchess of Mantua, had consented to be its official protectress. Trouble only came with the foundation of the house in Lyons.

In 1614, several ladies of Lyons, having become acquainted with the teaching of De Sales and the life in his Congregation, desired to have a Visitation in their city. The consent of the Archbishop, Denis de Marquemont, was necessary. He acquiesced, but changed his mind. He too wanted to be a founder; consequently he designed a Lyonesse version of the Visitation called the Presentation of Our Lady. The experiment turned out most unsuccessfully, so that Mother Chantal was called in after all to make the foundation. Presently it became apparent that the Archbishop was not satisfied with the new member of his religious family. In 1615 he tactfully

suggested to Francis de Sales that it would be highly irregular and cause for future trouble if the Sisters continued to live without enclosure.

A reform in this respect necessarily involved the establishment of the Congregation as a formal Order. Francis de Sales would have preferred to keep the old Rule, though he was willing to concede the matter of enclosure and public vows. At first he was even adamant on keeping the enclosure as moderate as possible. Marquemont, however, was obstinate. For a year letters went back and forth in a steady stream. The poor Mother Superior in Lyons was hard put to keep the Archbishop from changing the rules of her house on his own responsibility. Finally, in 1616, the Bishop of Geneva gave in, saying he did not wish to hinder the progress of the Visitation in France. In July he wrote to Cardinal Bellarmine asking him to further matters in Rome. The Visitation was to come under the Rule of St. Augustine, with the enclosure as directed by the Council of Trent. The Rules were approved by Rome. Marquemont was still dissatisfied; he wanted to improve the Tridentine provisions for enclosure. Peace was not restored until the final bulls came from Rome in 1618.

Any nursing of the poor was, of course, out of the question after that date. The work of Martha from then on was restricted to the community of nuns. There is no indication that Marquemont had objected particularly to the idea of serving the poor. It was apparently inconceivable to him that a group of nuns could go about a city without harm to their vocation. Anything Francis de Sales might have said about similar activities in Italy would have gone unheeded. Marquemont was not mystic; he could not share his view that an enclosure by spirit is the most effective. He probably had visions of scandal.

Marquemont's victory has indirectly given rise to new controversy: Was Francis de Sales the frustrated precursor of Vincent de Paul, and were the Sisters of the Visitation an early version of the Sisters of Charity, rendered ineffective by reactionary prejudice? The battle lines were not drawn until the mid-nineteenth century, possibly because that was the time when the Catholic Church had become particularly interested in various aspects of social welfare. Before that time, no one seemed to have been struck by the apparent similarity between the work of De Paul and De Sales. In the early 1860's, however, Bishop Bougaud published his history of the Visitation, in which he stated categorically that St. Chantal had founded the original model of the Sisters of Charity, but that her design had been thwarted by circumstances. This statement was obviously inaccurate. St. Chantal had not founded anything by herself; she had walked in the path marked out for her by Francis de Sales. Bougaud, moreover, contradicted himself further on in his work. His assertion was nevertheless taken up by a number of subsequent authors.

Fortunate Strowski, a specialist in seventeenth century French religion, was of the opinion that the difference, if any, between De Sales and De Paul had been negligible. Had the visitation preserved in its original intentions, the Sisters of Charity might not have been needed, but Francis de Sales had allowed the Congregation to drift into mysticism. Other authors came to

the same conclusion but put the blame on Marquemont. The last in this line went so far as to assert with absolute certainty that De Sales had intended to establish the Sister of the Visitation as what today would be called visiting nurses and social case workers.

Counter-attacks were naturally not long in coming. In 1877 the Sisters of the Visitation published the collected works of St. Jane de Chantal. They included a note to the effect that the original function of the Visitation had of late been grossly misinterpreted. The nuns reiterated the main purposes of the Congregation: to open the religious life to those too infirm to make their profession elsewhere, and the devotion to the love of God. Works of charity were definitely an accessory practice, since only two nuns from the whole community were deputed to serve the sick each month. Dom Mackey, the scholarly editor of the works of de Sales repeated essentially the same argument, as did Trochu some forty years later. Neither side appears to have convinced the other.

Yet there are a number of points to which the defenders of the thought of Francis de Sales might have alluded. It seems indeed as though their opponents had never taken the trouble to read the original Constitutions of the Visitation. They based their case on other sources. One of these was a pronouncement attributed to Francis de Sales by his most fervent disciple, the Bishop of Belley, Jean-Pierre Camus. Apparently the Bishop of Geneva one day had chanced to say that he could not see how the people called him the Founder of the Visitation. He had never intended to found a religious Order. There were enough of those in the Church as it was. He had intended the Visitation to be a simple, unpretentious Congregation so that its members might be free to exercise material charity to their fellowman. As things had turned out, he had accomplished exactly the opposite.

This statement had been dismissed as immaterial by Dom Mackey. Actually, it only bears witness to the duality in De Sales' purpose—the combination of contemplative and active Charity. Rather more definite was a statement made by Vincent de Paul in a discourse to the Sisters of Charity.

“It had been deemed fitting that you keep the name of the Society or Confraternity, and Monseigneur the Archbishop of Paris has ordered it thus, lest, if you were given the name of Congregation, some would be found who in future would change the house into a cloister and make themselves nuns, as the Daughters of Holy Mary (Visitation) have done. God had permitted that poor girls have succeeded to the place of these ladies...the crown which God had prepared for the Daughters of Holy Mary.

The emphasis placed on this testimony ought to be limited, inasmuch as the discourses of De Paul to the Sisters of Charity were preserved only in the form of minutes of the meetings. There is consequently no guarantee that his precise words or their exact context have come down to us. Even if full reliance could be placed on them, they would prove nothing about the intentions of Francis de Sales. De Paul was by his very character prone to stress the practical

aspects of the Visitation. The evidence is certainly against any close parallel between that Order and the Sisters of Charity.

According to the Rule of the Visitation as sketched in 1610, on the second day of each year the community was to elect a number of nuns for the service of the sick. From this number, two would be appointed each month to go about the city, while the other Sisters remained at their usual occupations-mainly prayer and meditation. The house might take in work, such as sewing, but this was never to interfere with the spiritual activity of the Sisters. This scarcely sounds like an Institute of visiting nurses. Moreover, as had already been pointed out, the Visitation nurses did not exclude the rich from their care. The Sisters of Charity, on the contract, confined themselves to the poor. The Queen herself had trouble getting one to accompany her on her travels, and when the Duchess d'Aiguillon, great patroness of the works of De Paul, desired to have a Sister of Charity in her house, the result was most disappointing. De Paul could not well refuse her the favor, but the Sister who was sent declined to stay, saying tearfully to the Duchess that she would gladly serve her were she poor. The trouble was, Madame was rich!

Furthermore, although the Sisters of Charity were commanded to devote about two hours a day to prayer and were exhorted to mortify themselves, they had no choir nor any obligation to high contemplation. Yet Francis de Sales, as he wrote to Marquemont in 1615, had intended to give God "maidens of prayer." From the day the Visitation was founded, the Sisters recited the little Office of the Virgin in choir; only such nuns who were too weak or were incapable of learning the Latin were excluded from this practice. Vincent de Paul had no such pretensions. He told the Sisters of Charity that they should have no other intention than the service of God and the poor, that the holiness of their estate depended on their being true daughters of God and true mothers to the destitute. He never came first, even if they necessitated the interruption of prayer. The whole day of the Sisters of Charity was organized around this fact. Indeed the correspondence with De Paul shows a constant preoccupation with the problems of poverty. As one author has put it, Vincent de Paul's passion for the poor was like the love of a mother for her child.

It could not be said that Francis de Sales was indifferent to the poor. Mother Chantal, in her deposition for his canonization trial, maintained that he had shortened his life considerably by his activity on their behalf. He helped everyone who came to him in need, with advice, letters of petition and recommendation, or money. He extended aid to converted Calvinists who had lost their means of livelihood in Geneva. Since he never refused alms to anyone, he was all his life in straitened financial circumstances. He, moreover, was most assiduous in visiting hospitals and prisons. "It seems as though this Blessed One lived only for the service and consolation of his fellow-man."

Vincent de Paul, on the other hand, shared many of De Sales' ideas. The two men had met in Paris in 1618, and had soon become friends. When a house of the Order of the Visitation

was founded in Paris the following year, De Sales and Mother Chantal agreed on Vincent de Paul's appointment as its superior and spiritual guide. The same choice was made some years later for the second house. De Paul remained in these posts until his death in 1660. His high esteem and affection for Mother Chantal were indeed reciprocated. In 1639 the Priests of the Mission were to work in Annecy; Mother Chantal was enthusiastic. She asked De Paul for information regarding the manner of life of the Mission Priests. After their arrival she took them under her wing, prepared furniture and vestments for them, and was generally occupied with their welfare.

Vincent de Paul in turn appreciated the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God* so much that they were his favorite reading matter. The rules of the first Company of Charity, in Chatillon-les-Dombes, included the provision that those of the ladies who could read should carefully study one chapter a day of the *Introduction*. Nor was De Paul's conception of divine love at variance with that of De Sales: "What is the will of God? He wants those who love him to love him without reserve. Those, therefore, who have taken the vow of poverty, who have left everything behind, who no longer cling to anything, who have affection for nothing, are thereby forced to bear their affection and love to God, for it would be impossible to live without loving."

Yet even there Vincent de Paul expressed himself in the concrete term of poverty. De Sales would have said: We love only God and therefore we renounce the world. De Paul started from the other end. Poverty, as usual, came first with him; he had no gift for building mystical structures. The Visitation, for instance, which embodied the thought of De Sales, was a charge of love and friendship to De Paul, but it took a secondary place in his life. As the Missions and Charities spread over the land the thought it time to cut down the extent of his personal responsibilities. What did he propose to give up? The supervision of the Paris houses of the Visitation. Pleas and arguments to the contrary were of no avail. He was, in the end, actually constrained to remain in his post through the efforts of the Marquise de Maignelais, a benefactress of the Visitation who happened to be closely related to the Archbishop of Paris and various other eminent French prelates.

The contrast between De Sales and De Paul is perhaps most clearly revealed by their reactions to a crisis which each of them experienced at one point in his life. At school in Paris, Francis de Sales was a serious, quiet student. Though he hardly mingled with others, he could not, however, entirely avoid contact with Calvinistic doctrines which were discussed everywhere in France in the 1580's. Given, as he was, to introspection, he began to brood over the Huguenot ideas on predestination and grace. The result was a well-nigh fatal temptation of faith. Francis visibly wasted away, tortured by secret self-doubt and the conviction that salvation and eternal glory were not to be his portion. His notebooks from that time show that he collected verses from the Psalms, all imploring the mercy of God. When it seemed as though he could bear no more, he

finally resolved to act. At the feet of the Virgin in Notre-Dame he pronounced this heroic act of renunciation: "I shall love you, Lord, at least in this life, if it be not given to me to love you in the eternal one; at least I shall ever hope in your mercy, and always will I repeat your praises... If, because I necessarily deserve it, I must be cursed among the damned who will never see your gentle face, grant me this much at least, let me never be one of those who curse your holy name."

Having thus resigned himself as fully as humanly possible to the will of God, Francis de Sales presently recovered his faith, though which the addition of a deeper and richer cast.

Young Vincent de Paul, some thirty years later also ravaged by temptations of faith, "promised God to consecrate the rest of his days to the service of the poor. This resolution immediately routed the temptation, and that for life.

Both men made an act of renunciation, yet their terms were as different as night and day, as mysticism and concrete practicality. Whereas Francis de Sales envisaged the totality of life, Vincent de Paul saw only a corner of it. The poor and forsaken were his universe.

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