

Saints
by Our
Side

Francis
de Sales

&

Jane
de Chantal



Wendy M. Wright

Saints by Our Side

*Francis de Sales and
Jane de Chantal*

By Wendy M. Wright



BOOKS & MEDIA
Boston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wright, Wendy M., author.

Title: Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal / by Wendy M. Wright.

Description: Boston, MA : Pauline Books & Media, 2017. | Series: Saints by our side | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016028408 | ISBN 9780819827388 (pbk.) | ISBN 081982738X (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Francis, de Sales, Saint, 1567-1622. | Chantal, Jeanne-Françoise de, Saint, 1572-1641. | Christian saints--Biography. | Friendship--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BX4655.3 W753 2017 | DDC 282.092/2 [B] --dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016028408>

The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition*, copyright © 1989, 1993, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Excerpt from John Paul II's *Letter on the Fourth Centenary of the Episcopal Ordination of St. Francis de Sales* copyright © Liberia Editrice Vaticana. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Cover design by Rosana Usselman

Cover art: Paintings executed in the 1950s by a Chicago artist, Ludwig Scheuerle. Used with permission of the Sisters of the Visitation, Toledo, Ohio.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

“P” and PAULINE are registered trademarks of the Daughters of St. Paul.

Copyright © 2017, Wendy M. Wright

Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Pauls Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in the U.S.A.

www.pauline.org

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.



Contents

INTRODUCTION

Coming to Know Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal	1
---	---

CHAPTER ONE

The World of the Salesian Saints	5
--	---

CHAPTER TWO

Formative Years	11
---------------------------	----

CHAPTER THREE

Turbulent Times	17
---------------------------	----

CHAPTER FOUR

Forging New Paths	23
-----------------------------	----

CHAPTER FIVE

An Unforeseen Future	31
--------------------------------	----

CHAPTER SIX	
Their Stories Converge	41
CHAPTER SEVEN	
Spiritual Friendship	55
CHAPTER EIGHT	
Birth of a Community	67
CHAPTER NINE	
Conflict and Growth	85
CHAPTER TEN	
Trials	95
CHAPTER ELEVEN	
Ending and Beginning Anew	105
CHAPTER TWELVE	
Final Years of Faithful Service	109
Epilogue	117
Prayer in Honor of Saints Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales	119
Reflection Questions	121
Chronology	123
Notes	131

INTRODUCTION



Coming to Know
Saints Francis de Sales
and Jane de Chantal

My decades-long familiarity with Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal began in the late 1970s when I was at the end of my graduate studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara and was searching for a dissertation topic. To write about a woman seemed natural as the retrieval of Christian women's texts and stories from the past had just begun in earnest in the English-speaking world. I was attracted to women with a contemplative bent, but sensed that I would need to feel a certain affinity with my subject. Six-year-old visionaries, women who eschewed marriage, and heroic martyrs were wonderfully fascinating, but my personal experience did not match that of these women. Plus I needed to find someone who was not overstudied

so that I could break new ground, but whose writings were not so inaccessible that they would require decades of research in remote archives. As I surveyed the historic tradition, I kept coming across the name of Jane Frances Frémyot, baroness de Chantal, mostly as a footnote in accounts of Francis de Sales, the seventeenth-century, French-speaking bishop from the duchy of Savoy and author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. In fact, Francis himself tended to be something of a footnote in general histories of Christianity written in the 1970s, since figures from the era of the Catholic Reformation—with the exception perhaps of Carmelites Teresa of Àvila and John of the Cross—were not much studied at the time.

Jane drew me. She had been happily married, raised four children, and led a householder's life but also had a leaning toward a more contemplative existence. Due to the untimely death of her husband and her fated meeting with Bishop de Sales, she embraced religious life. Those events changed everything for her. I felt that I could identify both with her contemplative impulses and her identity as wife and mother, as well as with her experience as a working woman, since Jane was the busy foundress of a burgeoning community.

Thus I met Francis through Jane. My dissertation focused on their spiritual friendship as seen through the lens of Jane's growth and transformation. Because much of her correspondence with her mentor and friend has been lost, I had to reconstruct a good deal of their shared experience by reading his letters of spiritual guidance to her. This allowed me to, as it were, sit at his feet and learn in a special way. I also read a great deal of his voluminous correspondence to others and his writings for the public. All that

reading was deeply formative for me. I quite simply came to love the spiritual perspective they shared. That perspective emerges from the rich soil of early-modern Catholic-Christian humanism. It is optimistic, balanced, heart-centered, and relational, applicable to many different persons in diverse circumstances, eras, and lifestyles. It has weathered the test of time well and continues to inspire us today.

Over the years I have had opportunities to continue to study Francis, Jane, and Salesian spirituality from a variety of perspectives. Although I have written extensively, I am delighted to be asked to pen a joint biography, quite a different task than considering simply the two saints' relationship. It has given me a perspective from which I have never viewed the two of them before. For while the spiritual bond of friendship is at the heart of both their lives, Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal were also persons with very different life experiences and personalities. Their shared relationship did not fully define either of them. They were regarded by their contemporaries and by posterity in distinct ways. It is with delight that I turn again to the story of these two most attractive saints and see that story anew. It is a story that survives the centuries and speaks poignantly and powerfully in our present age.

CHAPTER ONE



The World of the Salesian Saints

Francis de Sales¹ arrived in the world on August 21, 1567, two months premature. His young mother, Françoise de Sionnaz; her older husband, François de Nouvelles; and the rest of the de Sales household feared for his life. According to one oral tradition, this tiny, frail infant—who was the heir to his family’s feudal estates—was hastily named and baptized as an emergency measure. According to other sources, a few days or a day later baby Francis, swathed in protective cotton bunting, was baptized in the local parish of Saint Maurice and entrusted to an experienced wet-nurse. He was then brought to the countryside chateau of Monthoux where the air was thought to be more healthful and the vulnerable child’s survival more assured.

Meanwhile, the patrimony to which Francis as the first-born male was destined—the seigneuries of both his father and his mother, Sales and Boissy, respectively—was also of concern to

the young mother.² His birth had been preceded by her fervent prayers for a successful conception, since the issue of a male child was culturally expected of her. Soon after her marriage, she had placed her heartfelt petition into the divine heart as she knelt before the legendary Shroud of Turin, which was on temporary display in the Church of Notre Dame de Liesse in the nearby lakeside town of Annecy. She had even gone so far as to privately dedicate the hoped-for infant to the future service of God. After Francis was born, however, his mother's concerns became focused on the tiny child's well-being. He flourished in the country air and eventually rejoined his family.

That family quickly grew—Françoise would eventually give birth to thirteen more children. Throughout his life Francis gave much affection and loyalty to his beloved family. He is remembered as being an intelligent, obedient, and deeply affectionate child. His parents carefully nurtured him to grow into an exemplary gentleman who adhered faithfully to the Roman Catholic faith. They led by good example, attending the parish church and religious rites regularly and treating their servants and the poor with generosity and courtesy.

As he matured Francis showed a talent for study, but as heir he was also expected to excel at swordsmanship, hunting, fencing, and riding. His father, especially, insisted on his being raised on a bracing regime of wholesome food, outdoor play, and sleeping alone in the dark. This latter practice, designed to improve character and foster courage, was challenging for the sensitive boy. Years later, in a letter to a correspondent, the adult Francis would admit his terrible fear of the dark. It is characteristic of him that, even as a child, he met this challenge as a spiritual one.

When I was young I was afflicted with this fantasy [that malign spirits lurked] and in order to rid myself of it, I forced myself little by little to go alone, my heart armed with confidence in God, into those places that frightened me. Finally I became so strong that the darkness and solitude of night became my delight.³

This remembered childhood fear of the dark and its resolution gives us a first intimation about the spiritual practices that would come to typify the adult man's spirituality. Characteristically, these disciplines would involve formation of the imagination. Fear, in this prepubescent case, was countered by directly confronting the terrorizing imaginative construct with another more confident one.⁴

The picturesque alpine town of Annecy to which his mother, the young Madame de Boissy, had traveled from her estates in the countryside, was geographically remote from the great cities of sixteenth-century Europe. But Annecy had long been at the crossroads of continental political affairs. The remains of ancient Roman settlements existed alongside the fortified chateau long used by the Dukes of Savoy. In the not distant past the troops of the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdoms of France and Spain had crossed through the high mountain passes that led to Annecy and claimed outlying Savoyard territories as strategic outposts. Savoy was a proud independent duchy fifty miles south of Geneva, extending into the Piedmont region. Savoy was bordered on the west by the Kingdom of France and on the southeast by the Italian city states. Its capital, Turin, was home to one of the more sophisticated aristocratic courts of the era. Two Savoyard dukes,

Emmanuel Philibert (reigning from 1553–1580) and Charles Emmanuel I (reigning from 1580–1630) would rule and command the diplomatic loyalty of the house of Sales throughout Francis' lifetime.

Besides being an integral player on early modern Europe's dynastic and territorial chessboard, Savoy, and the town of Annecy especially, was significant from a religious point of view. When Francis entered the world in 1567, the great Christian reformations had been reshaping the ecclesial and spiritual map of Europe for three-quarters of a century. Europe was divided between countries and regions that embraced the changes initiated by those who came to be known as Protestants and those that still looked to Rome for religious guidance. Just three years before Francis' birth the Council of Trent, which had crafted the reforming agenda of the Roman Catholic Church, had closed its final session. Trent's decrees would gradually reshape the religious world in which the boy would mature. Among the reformers who had broken with Rome and initiated various new programs, theologian John Calvin had fled France and taken refuge in the city of Geneva. In 1541, he spearheaded a theocratic revolution of Church and civil society based on principles laid out in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Opponents of Calvin's programs, including the Roman Catholic bishop whose see was historically centered in Geneva, were forced out. One year after the birth of Francis, Annecy became the official seat of the exiled prelate. The modest wooden church of Saint Pierre became the truncated diocese's cathedral, located in the center of the city beside one of the town's many picturesque canals.

The dukes of Savoy claimed fervent loyalty to the Church of Rome. Geneva had long been part of the diocese. Not only was it now Calvinist, but territories that had once belonged to the duchy had also been lost and evangelized for the Protestant faith. Further, the distinctive political-religious turmoil that had for decades torn at the fabric of the Kingdom of France was soon to escalate and create fissures in neighboring lands. Most European political territories, generally following the lead of their rulers, had aligned themselves with either the Church of Rome or with one of the branches of Protestantism. France found itself in an incendiary situation with a divided population. Powerful French noble families lined up to oppose each other and marshal support either for the Huguenots, as French Calvinists were called, or those who championed a thoroughly Catholic France.

In the midst of this civil unrest, the crown had been weakened in 1560 by the death of the young monarch Francis II and the ensuing regency of the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici, who stood in for her underage son, Charles. Catherine and her advisors attempted to assuage religious tensions by recognizing Roman Catholicism as the state religion while forbidding any injury or injustice to French citizens who had differing religious loyalties. The compromise did not hold, and in 1562 the first battle of the French Wars of Religion broke out. These ferocious military conflicts were fueled by the rival noble factions. For decades the prolonged and vicious strife would continue to fuel violent confrontations and harden religious loyalties. Unaware of all this, the tiny, frail Savoyard infant entered this world, which would shape him in unexpected ways.