

Saint of the Month for August 2013

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, Religious
Monday, August 12

Saint Jane Frances de Chantal was born in 1572 in Burgundy, France. Her mother died when she was very young, but her father worked very hard to provide for his children's education, religious practice, and general preparation for life. Jane was given the name Frances at her confirmation, and seems to have profited above her siblings from her father's efforts. At the age of 20 she was given in marriage by her father to the 27 year old Baron de Chantal, an officer in the French army. Baroness de Chantal established order and good management at her new home, which had suffered after the death of her husband's mother.

The couple had seven children, but three died soon after birth, as was all too common in that era. The Baron and Baroness then were blessed with a boy and three girls who did well. They were quite happy for nine years, when in 1601 her husband went shooting with a friend and was accidentally shot in the thigh; he died after nine painful days. Jane overcame any bitterness toward the man who had been the cause of her husband's death and "did him every office in her power, and stood godmother to one of his children."

Jane was now 28, and suffered from dejection for four troubling months; her father managed to rouse her with a letter reminding her of her obligations to her children. She divided her time between her prayers, the instruction and care of her children, and her work. She particularly prayed for a holy guide, someone we might call a spiritual director. She eventually found such a person in St. Francis de Sales.

She lived with her father at Dijon for a time, and then with her father-in-law, who was "a vain, fierce, and extravagant old man;" the house was "ruled by an insolent housekeeper of bad reputation." Such fun! Anyway, Jane put up with these trials and did not complain.

In 1604 Jane returned to Dijon with her children and again lived with her father; the impetus seems to have been a visit by St. Francis de Sales to that area to preach during Lent. Jane very much wanted to hear this famous preacher. St. Francis often ate at her father's house, and she became convinced that St. Francis would be an excellent spiritual guide. He accepted that role after Jane's multiple requests.

Jane followed a strict rule of life, and devoted much time to her children and to visiting the poor and dying in her neighborhood. The two corresponded frequently, and Jane visited Francis at Annecy, his main residence. Francis limited her bodily mortifications, and did not let her forget that she was still a woman in the world, an old man's daughter, and a mother. He moderated Jane's tendency to excess strictness with her children, so they profited almost as much as Jane from his friendship!

She began to think about joining a cloister- her ideas were helped along by the presence of Carmelite nuns in Dijon. She discussed this with St. Francis, and in 1607 he unfolded

his proposal: there would be a new establishment, a congregation of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary. Jane had much anguish about how to do this and still take care of her children and her father, but in 1610 a convent was opened at Annecy on Trinity Sunday, with Jane and two other sisters and a servant. Ten other women soon joined them. At this point the group had no name and an uncertain scope, except that “it was to be a haven for those whose health, age, or other considerations debarred them from the already established orders.”

This new order took good roots, and more convents were opened in France. In 1619 St. Francis asked her to come to Paris and open a house there, which she did “in the face of open hostility and underhand intriguing.” Mother Jane was in charge of this convent for three years. In 1622 St. Francis de Sales died; he was buried at the church of her convent at Annecy.

St. Jane suffered much from the death of her son and other close relatives. She also had “interior anguish, darkness and spiritual dryness which she sometimes experienced to a terrible degree, as appears from several of her letters.” This reminds me of Blessed Mother Teresa and other saints who kept on their spiritual journey when the lights were dim or even out.

During the years 1635-1636 Mother Jane made a visitation of the convents of her order, which consisted of 65 houses; many of these convents had never been visited by her. By her death there were 85 houses. In 1641 she was invited to Paris by the queen, Anne of Austria, and to her distress was treated there with great distinction and honor. On her return she fell ill on the road, and died at her convent in Moulins, France, on December 13, 1641, at 69 years of age. Her body was taken to Annecy and buried near the tomb of St. Francis de Sales. She was canonized in 1767.

The commemoration is given the rank of Optional Memorial, and is usually celebrated on August 12 in the United States. (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); Butler’s **Lives of the Saints, 2nd Edition** (Ave Maria Press); **Magnificat**, August 2013)

Collect from the Mass of Saint Jane Frances de Chantal:

O God, who made Saint Jane Frances de Chantal
radiant with outstanding merits in different walks of life,
grant us, through her intercession,
that, walking faithfully in our vocation,
we may constantly be examples of shining light.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

Many of us have multiple careers and vocations, and the changes are often beyond our control. We ask God for the ability to cope with these new directions, especially when they are forced on us. We also ask for perseverance in faith when God seems far away or not listening, and we can’t figure out why. Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, pray for us!