

JANE DE CHANTAL AND FORGIVENESS ¹

Saint Jane de Chantal was a seventeenth century noblewoman, best known perhaps as foundress, with the Counter Reformation bishop, Saint Francis de Sales, of the Visitation Order. She has been proposed by the Church as a role model for all states of a woman's life, from young girl to married woman to mother and widow, and, finally, nun. The purpose of this essay is not hagiographical, but to show how she dealt with a little-known aspect of her life – her heroic magnanimity in forgiveness on several occasions: toward her husband who had been unfaithful to her, to the accidental murderer of her husband and to the servant-mistress of her father-in-law who tyrannized her during her widowhood. But she should first be situated in context.

Young girl

The second daughter of Bénigne Frémyot and Marguerite Berbisey, she was born in Dijon on January 23, 1572. Her mother died 18 months later giving birth to her only son, André, future archbishop of Bourges. The children were brought up by their father, president of the parliament of Dijon, a man of deep faith and integrity which he transmitted to them, and an aunt. Jane was a vivacious child and an attractive, much sought after, adolescent.

She proved her worth when, as a teenager, she lived with her newlywed sister and brother-in-law in the west of France; she resisted all attempts at perversion by a servant who dealt in sorcery. She also defied her sister's husband who tried to pressure her into a marriage with a friend of his who was a hardened *huguenot*, and therefore enemy of the Catholic faith. The friend had hidden his real convictions in order to win Jane's hand, but she saw through him and refused. She did this at a time when women were expected to be docile and obedient.

Wife and Mother

Her father recalled her to Dijon, in Burgundy, when she was 20, after the political troubles which disrupted France had been settled by the advent of Henri IV as king of France. He renounced Protestantism and adhered to the Catholic faith, considering "Paris worth a mass".

Jane's charm attracted many suitors, but President Frémyot had already chosen the young man to whom he intended to give her in marriage, as was the custom of the time. Christopher de Rabutin, baron de Chantal, the only son of Guy de Rabutin and Françoise de Cosseret, was 27, brilliant, and served God and his king with all the ardor of his passionate nature. The President knew him well, and the young man had made a reputation for himself during the wars of the League in Burgundy.

This arranged marriage was a happy one, and turned out to be a love match as well. Jane, who had grown up in opulence and led a carefree life, had no personal knowledge of the concerns life and marriage could bring. At her husband's insistence she sacrificed her dearly loved liberty, and took over the management of the Bourbilly estate, the home of the young couple near Semur, France.

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They had six children; the first two died in early infancy. Their only son, Celse Bénigne, would eventually become the father of Marie de Rabutin Chantal, marquise de Sévigné, the famous French letter writer.

Madame de Chantal lived an ordinary Christian life, was a good mother to her children, generous to the poor, and insisted that her husband accompany her to mass at the parish church on Sundays. She felt the nobility should give an example of Christian living to the peasants. In her husband's absence most of her prayers, by her own admission, were for his well being and safe return home. She made good resolutions to lead a more devout life, but as soon as Christopher came home, these resolutions vanished, and the round of festivities he liked so much began again.

This fairy-tale life, divided between family joys, hunting parties and worldly gatherings came to an abrupt and tragic end. Christopher came home from court, ill, at the beginning of 1601. Jane nursed him back to health with the competence dictated by her love for him. During his convalescence they talked for hours about the futility of this life, and the happiness of serving God alone. The sick man, closer to eternity than he realized, suggested they make a mutual promise that the first one to be freed by the death of the other should consecrate the rest of his or her life to God's service. Jane couldn't bear the idea of death or losing her husband, and changed the conversation every time it came up.

In the fall, Chantal, accepted an invitation to go hunting with his cousin and close friend, Louis d'Anlèzy, baron of Chazelles. This was a fatal decision. The cousin accidentally fired his *arquebus*, an early type of portable gun, and Christopher was mortally wounded. Knowing he was dying, he pardoned his cousin, sent servants to several parishes for a priest, and another to his wife to tell her of the accident. Jane had given birth to their last daughter just a few days before and was still in bed. She immediately went to her husband who had been taken to a house in a near-by village. It was he who tried to divert her anger from the imprudent cousin. It was he who prevented the hapless man from plunging his sword into his own heart to avenge on himself the death of his friend. Christopher de Rabutin Chantal, still a young man, died a very Christian death after nine days of agony.

The life of Jane de Chantal was changed forever.

Forgiveness

From that moment she yearned for a more complete dedication of her life to God and would have fled to a desert in the Holy Land if she hadn't had the responsibility of rearing her four small children.

During the Lent of 1604, Francis de Sales, bishop of Geneva in exile in Annecy, France, was invited to give the sermons in the Sainte Chapelle at Dijon.

He was born in the village of Thorens in Savoy in 1567, was a brilliant student in Paris and at the university of Padua where he earned a doctorate in civil and canon law. In spite of his father's plans for a career for him in the senate of Savoy, his heart and will were set on following the call of the Lord to the priesthood. He was eventually ordained priest and bishop.

The two met for the first time during that Lenten season in Dijon. Jane asked him to take over the direction of her soul, and Francis, after mature reflection agreed to do so. They corresponded for a number of years before Francis revealed to Jane his intention of founding a new religious order, and counted on her to be co-foundress.

He knew from the experience he had acquired in dealing with souls in the confessional, in Paris where he preached at court as well as most of the churches, with the soldiers in the barracks at Allinges, near Thonon, when he worked to bring the Calvinists back to the faith of their fathers, that many persons were called to give God love for love. He also knew that many could not do so because of inadequate health for the austere reformed orders, or who had no inclination for physical austerities.

He felt there was another way, and made the contemplative life, hidden with Christ in God, available to all sorts of women by interiorising asceticism. There would be a place for the physically strong as well as for those more delicate, and widows, once their family obligations had been met.

The foundation was to be made in his see city, Annecy, France.

Mme de Chantal's children were old enough by 1610 for her to collaborate in this new spiritual adventure. Before leaving Burgundy, she put her and her children's business affairs in order.

Her father, the President Frémyot, had already taken charge of the education of her son, Celse Bénigne. The youth was to follow in his father's footsteps at court and in the army. Marie Aimée, the eldest daughter, married the youngest brother of Francis de Sales, Bernard, baron of Thorens, in October 1609. The youngest died at age nine early in 1610. Jane de Chantal brought her other daughter, Françoise, with her to Annecy.

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We learn by a notarized act that her life as a woman and wife was perhaps not quite as idyllic as it seemed. Christopher, who had been described as being "very gallant until his marriage", apparently still had a few moments of weakness. He fathered a daughter outside his marriage. We know nothing of the circumstances of this affair except the name of the child: Claudine. We do not know the date of her birth or the identity of her mother. All we know is that Jane reared her with her own children.

If Claudine had been born before the marriage of her father, she would have been old enough to marry and remain in Burgundy when Jane came to Annecy to found the order of the Visitation. However this was not the case; Jane brought her with her.

Guy de Rabutin, baron de Chantal, the child's grandfather, drew up a codicil on February 7, 1606 to his preceding will dated June 9, 1603, in which he left a legacy of "100 livres to Claude, illegitimate daughter of his son, the late Christopher de Rabutin". In his last will, dated April 1st, 1610 he left her a considerable income which should revert to her when she should find a partner for marriage or if she should enter religious life, or in the place of this settlement she should be given 100 livres, according to her choice².

Through these cold facts penned impersonally, we can surmise to what an extent Jane de Chantal was a full blooded woman, the scope of her distress, and of that of so many women of her time – and not only of her time – a woman who dearly loved her husband and knew she was equally loved by the one who had been unfaithful to her. Whatever the circumstances of Claudine's arrival in the world Chantal accepted the responsibility of his paternity. Jane gave him the forgiveness and the understanding of a moment's weakness, and took the child into her home and her heart.

² Cf. Protocole of Bonaventure Goujon for the years 1608-1611, fol. 379 et 447, study of Mr. Redon, notary at Autun, cited in Lazare Collin, *Mon village, Thostes-en-Auxois*, Dijon, 1929, p. 169-170, n. 4.

This incident should not be over dramatized. It was unfortunately current in seventeenth century France when women did not have the independence they have today. A letter Jane wrote to her daughter, Marie Aimée, in 1617 helps us to better understand the mentality of that time: "...Women should consider themselves slaves as they are subject to men, most of whom live according to their passions, but this submission should be rendered for love of God who has imposed it..."³

She knew well what she was saying when she wrote that most men "live according to their passions". Jane de Chantal lived the submission of woman to man in faith. It was not just customary, inescapable "slavery".

If according to the social usages of that period, she really had no choice but to accept her husband's child, it did not mean she did not suffer in her heart and affections.

Marie Aimée de Rabutin, baroness of Thorens, Jane's eldest daughter, died September 7, 1617 in childbirth at Annecy, barely a few months after the death of her husband in Pignerol. She constituted Francis de Sales her universal heir. Her mother renounced the rights left her by her daughter, and, at her request : "The Lord Bishop promises to give and pay within the coming year to Mlle Claudine de Rabutin, bastard of the late baron de Chantal, husband of the same reverend mother superior, married to Nicolas Busact, in augmentation of her dowry, the sum of 50 écus equal to eight florins of Savoy..."⁴

Claudine grew up in the family and eventually married Nicolas Busact, a Savoyard. They had at least two daughters, born in 1614 and 1617. We find traces of them in Mother de Chantal's correspondence. She wrote from Annecy in 1627 to her son-in-law, Antoine de Toulonjon, her daughter Françoise's husband, for whom she was looking for trustworthy servants: "...If I can get them all together, we will send them to you at the same time, with Claudine's daughter. She's a lovely girl, big for her thirteen years, and taught to fear God."⁵

Several weeks later she wrote to her daughter-in-law. Marie de Coulanges, wife of her son, Celse Bénigne: "As to the little girl of our dear Claudine, she is a delightful child, but she's only ten or eleven years old. She was the godchild of my late daughter of Thorens (Marie Aimée). Let me know as soon as possible if you want her now; we will send her with her sister to my daughter de Toulonjon where you can send for her"⁶

The two little girls are sent to Alonne, home of the Toulonjons, and to Paris to the Chantals. Then, tragedy strikes again. Celse Bénigne, the young baron de Chantal is killed at the Isle of Ré in 1627, fighting the English invaders, and his widow dies in 1633, leaving their only surviving child an orphan.

The little girl is taken in charge by her maternal grandparents: the Coulanges. Jane again reveals her mother's heart in a letter to Mme Philippe de Coulanges⁷ : "I'm greatly indebted to this dear mother⁸, for the maternal love she had for the little orphan⁹, and also for her goodness in looking after the child Busact"¹⁰.

³ *Sainte Jeanne de Chantal, Correspondance*, Cerf-CEFI, 1986-1996, 6 vol. I, 213-214. Letter 106, to the baroness of Thorens, Annecy...

⁴ Archives of the Visitation of Annecy, Carton F. de S., liasse B, n° 18.

⁵ *Correspondance*, Letter 1027, To M. de Toulonjon, Annecy, 18 July 1627, III, 255

⁶ *Ibid.* Letter 1035, To the baroness de Chantal, Annecy, around August 12, 1627, III, 264-265.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Letter 1674, to Mme Philippe II de Coulanges, Annecy, Septembre 1627. IV, 542-543.

⁸ Mme de Coulanges.

⁹ Marie de Rabutin Chantal, daughter of Celse Bénigne and Marie de Coulanges.

¹⁰ One of the daughters of Claudine de Rabutin Chantal.

Jane de Chantal not only forgave her husband; she reared his daughter, settled her in life, and took a lasting interest in her children.

Forgiveness again

Fate – or life – again provided an occasion for magnanimity to the young woman, widowed at 28, and assuming the role of single parent for her still very young children. She never wanted to see the involuntary murderer of her husband again, and, in fact, refused to see him. It took all the wise and suave direction of Francis de Sales to bring her to reconciliation with him.

She went to Savoy to meet her spiritual director in the spring of 1605. She needed this personal encounter to discuss the needs of her soul; letter writing had become insufficient. We do not know if, at that time, they spoke of a possible meeting with the unfortunate baron de Chazelles. But in a letter dated July 3, 1605, Francis wrote to her: "It is not necessary for you to seek out the day or the occasion, but if they should present themselves, I want your heart to be gentle, gracious and compassionate. I know beyond any doubt that it will be distressed, that your blood will boil, but what does that matter?... I repeat, I do not expect you to seek an occasion to meet the poor man, but I do expect you to condescend to those who want to arrange the meeting, and that you manifest your love for all things. Yes, even the death of your husband..."¹¹.

Jane did meet him, gave him the forgiveness he had sought so long, and as she never did anything by halves, put a seal to this forgiveness by being godmother to a child of the man she had refused to see for more than four years.

Forgiveness a third time

After the first year of her widowhood, Jane's father invited her to stay with him for a while at Dijon. He wanted to try to divert her from her grief. She could not stay for long as she was the guardian of her children and had to see to their affairs. She returned to Bourbilly castle, her home during her marriage, where she received an ultimatum from her father in law, the baron Guy de Rabutin Chantal to come, with her children, live with him at his castle at Monthelon, near Autun. This gentleman, 75 years old, was severe and irascible. He said that if she refused to come he would remarry and disinherit her children. Jane, in order to provide for their future, and, doubtless knowing what was in store for her, obeyed and moved to Monthelon to endure, as she said herself, a purgatory which lasted seven and a half years.

Jane de Chantal whom Francis de sales one day described as "imperious", who had managed the estate of Bourbilly, who had liquidated her husband's debts, and had shown good business acumen; she who had been the pride of her husband, who had played her role as hostess and mother of her family with ease and authority, could say nothing at Monthelon. The old baron was completely dominated by a servant-mistress who had given him five illegitimate children. As the first biographer of Jane, Françoise Madeleine de Chaugy, so aptly wrote:: there is nothing worse than a servant become mistress of a household.

The roles were inversed. The proud baroness could not even give a glass of wine to a messenger without the servant's permission.

She accepted the situation in silence, without complaining. She even took care of the servant's children with her own, dressing and teaching them. It is easy to surmise the suffering

¹¹ *Œuvres de saint François de Sales*, Annecy, 1892-1964, XIII, 67-68.

her mother's heart endured in being obliged to rear her children in such an atmosphere, trying to teach them moral values, and good manners when they had just the opposite before their eyes every day. She accepted all this humbly without ever failing in charity toward the woman who tyrannized her.

The servant was jealous of Jane and did all she could to turn the old baron against her. Jane suffered to see the family fortune being squandered, but if she dared say anything the situation became much worse. M. de Chantal loved the grand life and wanted the servant to organize every aspect of it.

Jane kept her soul in peace, renounced all authority in the house, took care of the poor in a small room over the chapel and sewed for them.

This difficult situation, accepted and assumed to assure the future of her children, lasted until the foundation of the Visitation Order in 1610.

Again, notarized acts reveal the name of this person whom the biographers of Jane never mention: Girarde Rebourg, wife of Jehan du Verne, sergeant royal of Thostes, the neighboring estate.

Guy de Rabutin left to his mistress 150 livres in 1603; in 1609, a house with a garden and field at Monthelon. In his second will he leaves her another 150 livres "for salary as well as for the agreeable services rendered". In another act dated October 11, 1611, the old baron approves and ratifies the preceding bequests to Rebourg.

Jane de Frances Frémyot, then Mother Jane Frances de Chantal, who went to Burgundy to settle her father's estate after his death in January 1611, wrote the following note for her son; Celse Bénigne: "My dear son, I ask you and command you; if I should die before your grandfather, to leave Girarde the house he left her. I hope she will continue to serve him faithfully and preserve the prosperity of the house faithfully".¹²

Jane's father in law died in 1613. She returned to Burgundy, accompanied by her son, Celse Bénigne, and her son-in-law, the baron of Thorens, to regulate the succession. She was undoubtedly the first one to observe the directives she had given to her son. She wrote to Jean Coulon, the steward of the Chantal estate, on February 12, 1617: "Yes, we must render god for evil and provide for the necessities of Duverne"¹³

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¹² Cf. n. 2.

¹³ *Correspondance*, I, 217-219, letter 109, to Monsieur Coulon, Annecy, 12 February 1617.