

St. Jane Francis de Chantal



Jane Frances was wife, mother, nun, and founder of a religious community. Her mother died when she was 18 months old, and her father, head of parliament at Dijon, France, became the main influence on her education. Jane developed into a woman of beauty and refinement, lively and cheerful in temperament. At 21, she married Baron de Chantal, by whom she had six children, three of whom died in infancy. At her castle, she restored the custom of daily Mass, and was seriously engaged in various charitable works.

Jane's husband was killed after seven years of marriage, and she sank into deep dejection for four months at her family home. Her father-in-law threatened to disinherit her children if she did not return to his home. He was then 75, vain, fierce, and extravagant. Jane Frances managed to remain cheerful in spite of him and his insolent housekeeper.

When she was 32, Jane met Saint Francis de Sales who became her spiritual director, softening some of the severities imposed by her former director. She wanted to become a nun but he persuaded her to defer this decision. She took a vow to remain unmarried and to obey her director.

After three years, Francis told Jane of his plan to found an institute of women that would be a haven for those whose health, age, or other considerations barred them from entering the already established communities. There would be no cloister, and they would be free to undertake spiritual and corporal works of mercy. They were primarily intended to exemplify the virtues of Mary at the Visitation—hence their name the Visitation nuns—humility and meekness.

The usual opposition to women in active ministry arose and Francis de Sales was obliged to make it a cloistered community following the Rule of Saint Augustine. Francis wrote his famous Treatise on the Love of God for them. The congregation consisting of three women began when Jane Frances was 45. She underwent great sufferings: Francis de Sales died; her

son was killed; a plague ravaged France; her daughter-in-law and son-in-law died. She encouraged the local authorities to make great efforts for the victims of the plague, and she put all her convent's resources at the disposal of the sick.

During a part of her religious life, Jane Frances had to undergo great trials of the spirit—interior anguish, darkness, and spiritual dryness. She died while on a visitation of convents of the community.