

Salesian Seminar



BOND

OF PERFECTION:

Jane de Chantal & Francis de Sales

by

Wendy M. Wright, PhD

Published by



De Sales

SPIRITUALITY SERVICES

“practical paths to holiness”

www.oblates.org/dss

dss@oblates.org

A Discussion Group on
BOND
Of
PERFECTION

By Wendy Wright

Wendy Wright describes the spiritual friendship that existed between Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal as “...one in which the powerful dynamics of the interaction between male and female were experienced simultaneously with the most profound love of God.”

Chronicling the period of Jane’s life from the time she was a young widow drawn to the intimate spiritual direction of Francis, through the development of the new congregation for women – the Order of the Visitation – whose focus was the surrender of one’s self to the love and will of God, until her death in 1641, this account sheds new light on the lives of both saints and offers a vivid analysis of the nature of spiritual friendship between the sexes.

This book will appeal to readers of all states and stages in life, offering a powerfully positive view of celibate companionship that is an inspirational model for today, and for all times and seasons.

Read each chapter with an eye to the questions that we have provided in this De Sales Discussions. In addition, we would suggest that you reflect upon the general questions below after you have read each chapter:

- 1) What touched you in that section?
- 2) What are the most important points, feelings, truths that you want to hold on to, to incorporate in your own life?
- 3) Is he affirming what you already believe?
- 4) Is he challenging something that you believe?

General Discussion Guidelines and Hints

A discussion is a group of people engaged in conversation. This is a natural human activity: an interesting, exciting and creative experience. Discussion is a shared pursuit of responsive understanding -- of yourself, others and the material under consideration.

The purpose of leaders is to be a catalyst. They are present to help everyone (1) make a thoughtful examination of the meaning of the material to be discussed and the problems it presents, (2) clarify their thinking and feeling about the problems, and (3) decide their individual response. It is not presumed that leaders necessarily know more about the subject under discussion, but that they are trained and prepared to lead this discussion and offer this special kind of assistance to the group.

Don't expect pre-packaged or 'right' answers. Neither the leader nor a member of the group will provide a conclusive answer at the end of the discussion. Each of you will try to find personally satisfying answers; your pursuit of answers may continue long after any particular discussion period ends. The discussion provides information and deepened understanding, but the real answers will be your personal response to life and the world.

What Happens Before the Discussion?

Read over the text selection at least once and preferably twice, first for general comprehension and second for attention to specifics. On the second reading, underline words and phrases you consider important, and make notes in the margins of anything you did not understand; questions you would like to ask your group, and examples or applications that occur to you; What important ideas does it convey? How? Do these ideas conflict with other ideas or feelings you have? Are problem situations presented? How would you behave in such situations? Why?

What can I do to participate well in the discussion?

- Be committed and involved in the group.
- Treat others in the group with support and respect, even if you disagree with their views.
- Express support and agreement with others when appropriate.
- Be mindful of your nonverbal communication and behavior when you are not speaking

- Stick to the point.
- Say it in the group (not before or after to a few friends).
- Respect the confidentiality of others' disclosures.
- Make the meetings. It's difficult to re-create the discussion experience for you, and the group suffers from your absence and input when you're not there.
- Stay on the subject. Speak about the text, your reactions and others' responses.
- Speak to the entire group, not just one person.
- Seek your own understanding. Don't accept another's view as your own unless it makes sense to you.
- Be sure you understand what another is saying. This is especially true when you disagree with him or her.

(Adapted from E. W. Flynn and J. F. La Faso, Group Discussion as Learning Process: a Source book. Paulist Press, 1972)

**A Discussion Group on the book
BOND of PERFECTION**

**Session 1:
Introduction: Pages 3 - 31**

1. Why is transformation of the individual at the heart of male/female spiritual friendships?

2. How do I understand the goal of the contemplative life?

3. How do I understand the theology of early 17th century French Counter-Reformation Catholicism?

4. How do I understand de Sales' division of the soul?

5. How was early contemplative life a counter-cultural movement?

6. How were women seen in the society and church from the 4th century on?

7. How does monasticism influence women's spirituality?

8. How do relationships between women and men change during the monastic time?

9. How did "holiness" give a woman new "authority"?

10. How did “feminized” imagery in the late Medieval period influence devotion?

11. How would new spiritual friendships between men and women influence spirituality?

12. How did the Protestant Reformation influence women?

13. How did women influence France in the Counter-Reformation?

14. How did the “*imago dei*” (image of God) continue to influence spirituality?

**A Discussion Group on the book
BOND of PERFECTION**

**Session 2:
The Beginning: Pages 33 - 66**

1. What was Jeanne de Chantal's state of mind and soul in March 1604?

2. How did her friendship with Francois de Sales begin?

3. How did the religious divisions in France affect Jeanne and Francois?

4. The Council of Trent (1545) had a tremendous influence on the Church and its world. What do I believe the greatest influences were?

5. How did these changes affect popular spirituality?

6. Jeanne was a woman of great fidelity. How did that affect her after meeting Francois?

7. What marked Jeanne's life as the wife of Baron de Chantal?

8. How did his tragic death affect her?

9. How did Jeanne respond to the early letters of spiritual guidance from Francois?

10. How do I understand the experience of Jeanne at the shrine of St. Claude?

11. What advice did Francois give her about her “doubts against the faith”?

12. How did Francois view the Christian life?

13. What strikes me about the letter he wrote to Jeanne in October 1604?

14. What made Francois' spirituality so rugged a discipline?

15. How were Jeanne and Francois' personal styles complementary?

**A Discussion Group on the book
BOND of PERFECTION**

**Session 3:
Hidden Growth: Pages 67 - 101**

1. How would fidelity to one's situation provide Jeanne with opportunities for self-denial?

2. How would humility as a widow and patience deepen Jeanne's contemplative spirit?

3. How did Jeanne understand the consequences of realizing that her heart was meant for "God alone"?

4. How did Jeanne handle her “dryness” during this period?

5. How does the sacred humanity of Jesus fit into Jeanne’s growing spirituality?

6. How do I understand the “non-discursive” prayer that Jeanne seemed drawn to?

7. How did Francois encourage Jeanne in the practice of virtue?

8. How did Francois and Jeanne arrive at an understanding of God's will for her future?

9. What characteristics of the proposed new community for women strike you? Why?

10. How did Jeanne continue to learn to make her life one continual act of loving surrender?

11. How did Jeanne's spiritual growth enable her to handle her family situation as she prepared for her new life?

12. How would I describe Jeanne's sense of obedience?

13. How did Jeanne handle leaving her son? How did she feel?

**A Discussion Group on the book
BOND of PERFECTION**

**Session 4:
Friendship: Pages 102 - 158**

1. How can I explain the friendship between Jeanne and Francois?
2. How is friendship described by philosophers and Christian writers?
3. How did the language of “desire” enter and grow in the Christian tradition?

4. How was the Song of Songs (Old Testament) interpreted in reference to friendship?

5. How did Francois de Sales understand friendship?

6. What did he see as dangers in friendship?

7. How did Francois understand the human person as relational?

8. How do I understand the growing friendship between Jeanne and Francois?
What do I find remarkable in it?

9. How do I understand Jeanne's doubts on the eve of entering the Galarie?

10. How did Francois envision the daily life of the new religious community?

11. What did Francois admire in women? What were his insights into their unique struggles?

12. How do I understand Francois' distinction between "nudity" and "nakedness"?

13. How do I understand the relationship between “simplicity” and “nakedness”?

14. How do I understand “the bond” between the various Visitation communities?

15. What was Jeanne’s particular imprint on the Visitation community? How do I understand it?

16. How did Francois' contract with the community widen his vision of prayer?

17. How did Jeanne learn to lead by "winning their hearts"?

18. How do I understand the words "one heart and one soul" regarding their friendship?

19. How do I understand Jeanne's expression to her sisters: "Ours is a martyrdom of love"?

20. How do I understand Jeanne's "hidden" life?

4. How would her retreat change the relationship between Jeanne and Francois?

5. How do I understand love and the “bond of perfection” in their relationship?

6. How does Francois use “nakedness” to bring Jeanne to complete detachment?

7. How do I understand the paradox of intimacy and detachment?

8. How was Jeanne's detachment tested with the death of her son-in-law, daughter, and grandson?

9. How do I understand Jeanne's parenting role with the Visitation communities?

10. How did the content of letters change after Jeanne's retreat experience?

11. How did Jeanne's doubts affect her spiritual life?

12. How would I characterize the last meeting of Jeanne and Francois in Lyons?

13. How would I describe Jeanne's acceptance of Francois' death?

14. How had Francois prepared her for life without him?

15. How was Jeanne's prayer at Francois' coffin an expression of their enduring friendship?

A Discussion Group on the book
BOND of PERFECTION
The Nature of Spiritual Friendship: Pages 199 - 208

1. What were the assumptions and vision that undergirded the Christian contemplative tradition of which Jeanne and Francois were a part?

2. How do I understand the Christian contemplative as a transfigured person?

3. How do I understand the “love” and “death” theme in the life of a contemplative?

4. How are these themes a part of spiritual friendship?

5. How is it true for Francois that love of God is not in opposition to human love?

6. How do I understand “each person was to become a perfect lover of God”?

7. How does Christian asceticism contribute to a spiritual relationship between a woman and man?

8. How do I understand male-female friendship when both are celibate?

9. How could Wendy Wright write: “Francois and Jeanne lived out the full range of human and divine love of which the Christian tradition knew”?

10. What were the special gifts given by Jeanne and Francois to the Visitation?

11. How is the friendship of Jeanne and Francois symbolized well in the vision of Vincent de Paul on Jeanne's death?

Evaluation
A Discussion Group on the book
BOND of PERFECTION:
Jane de Chantal & Francis de Sales

1. In broad strokes, my experience of this discussion program was

Poor 2 Good 4 Excellent

2. What I learned during this discussion series was...

Not useful 2 Useful 4 Very Useful

3. During this discussion program, I really liked...

4. I would have enjoyed the discussion program more if...

5. Would you like to see a program like this to continue? If so, what Salesian topics or works would you like to explore?

6. Would you suggest any changes to the time, duration, and frequency of the discussion group?

Your Name _____ Date _____

Name of Parish/School/Ministry _____