

# Night Prayer

from the Office of the Dead

A monastic mystery centered on the lives of  
Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales by

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**Also by Brother Bernard Seif and a part of this series:**

(2001). *OFFICE OF THE DEAD*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.

(2002). *VIGILS from the Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.

(2004). *MORNING PRAYER from the Office of the Dead*. Martinsville, IN: Bookman Publishing.  
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(2006). *DAYTIME PRAYER from the Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.

(2009). *VESPERS Evening Prayer from the Office of the Dead*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, Inc.

This book is a work of fiction, based on seminal ideas drawn from the life of the author. Except for the persons of Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales, the characters and situations in this monastic mystery are the product of the author's creative imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any medical or psychological information provided herein is a part of this fictional work and is not presented as a form of diagnosis or treatment.

This book is dedicated to the members of the  
various branches of our Salesian family.  
Thank you for enriching my life and our world.



*Jane Frances Fremyot de Chantal (1572-1641).*

## CHAPTER 1 - FRANCE

The last breath of light from the golden yellow beeswax candle sputtered and then flared out, transformed into a wisp of black smoke. A trickle of molten wax flowed over the black iron candle holder and into a crack at the corner of the old oaken writing table. She could taste the acrid smell emitted from the candle wick as it filled the air momentarily.

Although it was almost completely dark, the young widow and mother, Jane de Chantal, picked up a tattered taper and walked with practiced ease to the dining hall to take a flame from the fireplace therein. Having done so, she returned to her dungeon-like quarters and lit an oil lamp so as to continue her writing. The periodic screeching and complaining of the housekeeper and paramour of her father-in-law was actually more of a distraction than was the darkness. Tattered quill in hand, she dipped it into the inkwell as she continued thinking about what thoughts to scratch out on the parchment before her.

*People continue to call it a hunting accident but I sometimes have my doubts. When I am not busy doubting the accidental nature of my husband's shooting with that harquebus gun, my anger burns within me hotter than the flame in the oil lamp presently trying to lull me into sleep. My feelings then turn to guilt for being so uncharitable as to hold my dear husband's cousin accountable for what he terms an accident. That supposed accident not only took from me the husband whom I adored, but also forced me to move to this dreadful place.*

*The law is not very kind to widows and orphans. My four living children and I would be destitute were it not for the mixed blessing of my father-in-law taking us into his castle. I call it "mixed" because the man is manipulative and angry, to put it mildly. He knows very well that widows and orphans have little standing in the eyes of the law. I would be left with nothing and my children, who are just beginning their lives, would have an uphill battle throughout their time on this earth. I have always disliked bookkeeping and managing others. The sad fact is, however, that I am decent at doing these tasks. Thus, I find myself in this wretched state of affairs. The housekeeper here really runs the place and resents my presence, although I have saved the place from bankruptcy. She complains about everything and anything day and night. My children are afraid to go near her, and I keep my distance as well.*

*Perhaps my own dear mother, who died in childbirth when I was less than two years old, is helping our little family from afar. I believe that the two children I lost while birthing them are watching over us also. I was to mother them but it may well be that they are the ones taking care of us. I am twenty-eight years old and a French baroness living in fear and depression. I might as well put anger on the list, because that is what I feel as well. Yet the reality is that when my late husband, Baron de Chantal, went off to do whatever it is that barons do when they are traveling, I often divested myself of the beautiful clothing it was my state in life to wear as a baroness, and would put on simpler garb. Then I would go out among the poor and do my best to help them. Many times I brought them food, sometimes I bathed their wounds, and always I prayed for them. This makes me no better than anyone else, for the poor are more a gift to me than I am to them.*

*Even when I learned that my dear husband had fathered a child by another woman, after I adjusted as best I could to this devastating news, I offered to take the little child into our home and raise her as my own. This never materialized, but I am now consoled by the fact that I did my best, after venting my hurt and anger upon my husband, to deal with the matter in a way that*

*was the most life-giving to everyone involved. It is sixteen hundred and one, the beginning of a new millennium, and I am being forced into a new phase of my existence.*

*My spiritual life, such as it is, seems to be the only thing that is helping me to cope with the agony of my present situation. Our good God knows that I am riddled with faults, and my understanding of the spiritual life is not very deep. I believe our good God also knows, however, that there is a longing in me as deep as life itself for union with the Sacred. How to experience that when surrounded by negativity, deceit, and intolerance is the burning and ever-present question.*

## CHAPTER 2 - CHINA

The dry yellow parchment pages crinkled like autumn leaves in his white-gloved hands. The smell of a vegetable stir fry laden with tofu wafted into his small guest room from the kitchen. Had he not been so absorbed in the four hundred year old documents before him, the monk would have heard the gentle rhythmic scraping of cooking utensils in a wok as the dinner sizzled over a gas burner. He was here to solve the mystery of what happened to the previous keeper of these parchments, and the one before that, and the one before that, all the way back to the fifteen hundreds in France.

Rumors about the existence of these documents had abounded for decades--along with stories of the catastrophic misfortunes of those who eventually possessed them. No one would tell him who the previous keepers were or where they went. Had they simply died off? Were they killed? Was he next? Were these parchments blessed or cursed? Brother Francis O'Neil needed to answer these questions, not so much for himself, but in order to protect others in his spiritual lineage if the parchments indeed attracted danger.

The first recorded death connected with someone who eventually was associated with the documents was that of Baron de Chantal. It was his grieving wife who had written about half of the correspondence in the stack of parchments. Had that long ago death begun a cycle, created a curse? Brother Francis was not a worrier by nature, but in recent years he had been clobbered over the head, nearly drowned by someone, and eventually shot. He was becoming increasingly cautious and needed to break through this stone wall of silence to see if any of his misadventures were related to the fact that he was to one day inherit the parchments. He needed to solve this puzzle before anyone else got hurt. Time was clearly of the essence.

His French was never very good. The monk spent twice as much time on his French homework in college, just to get by, as he did with other subjects that came more easily to him. Maybe all that study had something to do with why the horseshoe of hair now ringing his head had more silver than brown in it. Brother Francis smiled as he remembered his French professor coming into their classroom and finally speaking in English one day. This was the first time in two years that the professor was reduced to speaking in English. "Hoping against hope I come in here every day and try to teach you people French." Most of the people in the class of approximately twelve students were taking French to fulfill an obligatory language requirement, so it was either that or Spanish or German. Brother Francis chose French because it was the language of his spiritual family.

Founded in the early sixteen hundreds by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal, the Salesian community, as it would eventually be called, has branches all over the world. Lay men and women, as well as clergy and vowed monastics, follow the message of the Gospel today as exemplified through the spirit and experience of a widow and a kindly and practical French bishop. Now in his sixties, Brother Francis could smile gratefully about many of his life experiences—but more about that at another time. The older spoken and written French of the fifteen hundreds and sixteen hundreds was even harder to decipher than modern French for the Salesian monk. The good news resulting from the electronic age is that the monk now has a small computer-like electronic dictionary to look French words up in. The even better news is that the dictionary talks--even though it sounds a bit like an old "Chatty Cathy" doll. Brother Francis can hear the word he does not understand, which adds up to a multitude, spoken in French. He is actually learning as he is translating.

How was it that a young man from a tough section of Philadelphia, roots of which he was quite proud, would end up in mainland China reading material from over four hundred years ago, written by the original hands of the authors? Who were the people who had these documents passed on to them through a series of events spanning four centuries? Try as he might, the “mystery monk,” as Brother Francis has sometimes been called, could not seem to avoid being drawn into unsolved mysteries--and occasionally even murder. He shuddered to think that the latter might be the case yet again. It was hard enough to deal with complex and dangerous situations at home in his monastery in Pennsylvania, but it was even more challenging when abroad. The Chinese people were wonderful to him. He had enjoyed his hospital rotations in three Beijing hospitals about twenty years earlier. He took what he learned from those experiences and continued to develop his skills. Brother Francis practiced Chinese medicine at home in Pennsylvania, in addition to clinical psychology and natural medicine. He made yearly trips back to mainland China to work with the sick and the poor as a way of returning the favor he had received in being able to study their five thousand year old system of medicine earlier in his life, and practice it today.

The writings of St. Jane de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales were largely available in English. During the past few decades, encouraged by the spirit of Church renewal of Vatican Council II, most religious communities "went back to their roots." They researched the spirit and message of their founders. Thus it was that the members of the Salesian spiritual family began learning more and more about the personal and spiritual experiences of their founders. The material that Brother Francis held in his hands, written in black ink on parchment sheets, had not yet been seen by any of the Salesian scholars. It had not, in fact, been seen by just about anyone in four hundred or more years.





*Chinese roadside shrine.*

## CHAPTER 3 - PENNSYLVANIA

Sister Jane de Chantal, named after foundress of her order, was prioress of the little Salesian monastery in Brodheads ville Pennsylvania. Approximately sixty years of age, but with a youthful face and slightly spreading midriff, the nun performs her duties competently, but was always glad to have Brother Francis return from his trips to Asia and other places. Not only was their small monastic community complete again upon his return, but Brother Francis resumed leadership as the community's abbot, to her relief. Even though all members wear grey tunics with a navy blue scapular or cloth panel down the front and back, each member of the monastic community is unique. The nuns wear a blue veil and the monks have a cowl or hood attached to their scapular at the back of the neck.

Sister Scholastica is a woman gently approaching fifty years of age. Her bristly salt and pepper hair is often in need of being pushed back under her veil. She had recently taken her solemn or life vows. Prior to her solemn profession, the nun's mysterious past was finally, and *almost* completely, revealed by a series of strange events. She is a good woman of few words.

Brother Matthew is as simple and direct as Sister Scholastica is quiet and serious. Not yet thirty years of age, the young monk had given up a girlfriend in order to follow what he believed was his true calling. The situation took a tragic turn for the young girl, but he and the girl's parents still continue to correspond from time to time. Brother Benedict is dead. His younger brother in monastic life, Brother Matthew, had taken care of him during his last days. The community is still adjusting to this loss of approximately a year ago.

Clare Watson is now a postulant, a woman taking a live-in look at monastic life. Though almost completely unable to hear, she reads lips and hand gestures to the point that most people barely notice her hearing challenge. More fascinatingly, Clare is gifted with tremendous insight and intuition. She is able to sense the feelings and moods of others in a language more profound than words can convey. Perhaps her next step is to become a novice--to receive the monastic habit and to live as if she had already taken vows while studying the rule and way of life of the community—then again perhaps not.

Speaking of intuition, Madam Wu had been called to a life of ministry in that field many years before. She believes her ability to read the hearts and minds of others is a gift of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, it comes from God. She never takes a fee for her consultations, only accepting donations when appearing in a group setting. Before Brother Benedict became a monk Madam Wu was an important part of his life, but we will leave it up to her to share some of that with you if she is so inclined. The Christian clairvoyant is spending a month of retreat at the Salesian Monastery while her husband, Tian Wu, is visiting family in China.

People from the neighborhood come to pray with the community from time to time. Others from far and near come to spend a few days or longer in silence and contemplation. At the moment there are no other retreatants than the ever-fascinating Madam Wu living with the community.

## CHAPTER 4 - CHINA

His eyes burned and his head ached but he could not put the parchments down. Brother Francis devoured the French words whenever socialization, time, and manners permitted it. This was often late at night and was a slow process for him.

*"My dear daughter in the Lord,*

*"It fills me with both joy and sadness to hear from you--joy because of the courage you display in the midst of this most challenging of situations and sadness, of course, because of the challenging situation itself. The slowness of our ability to communicate through the mail frustrates me mildly on the human level. On the spiritual level I know that our good God will use all of this, including these unending delays in our ability to communicate, for the greater good of all things considered. Not being a parent, I can only guess at the anguish you must be experiencing concerning the comfort of your children. Living in a household controlled by, how shall I put this, a cranky old man, can only be a source of sorrow for you. The children of God, in fact all children, are meant to laugh and play joyfully. There is time enough for them to have to deal with the harsher realities of getting through this life. I do not mean that we are always in misery here on earth, but that life can be very difficult at times.*

*"Unfortunately, many people believe that spirituality and religion are ways of avoiding the harshness of life. Life's harshness cannot be avoided, and seeking to do so through religion, in my opinion, is unhealthy. All that our good God promises is that God will be with us in everything we encounter. I have never been one to believe that God purposely sends anyone difficulties in order for them to grow or learn something. Life happens, and God meets us in the circumstances of our life. I do not believe that God wants you to be in such dire straits. I also believe that God is just as much a mother as a father. As such, I am sure that our good God can relate to your struggles as a mother and a widow.*

*"One blessing, if I can call it that, of my chronic insomnia, is that I am afforded the time and space to write letters such as this one. In the dark of night, when good folks are asleep, I am sitting at my writing desk with quill in hand most nights of the week. Life always holds something of interest for me during the day. I recently, for example, came upon a young man who could not hear or speak very well. I communicated with him as best I could, and even created a simple sign language so that we might speak more easily. His physical challenges make it especially difficult for him to obtain work. I hired him as a worker in my household. He is exceptionally good at the important but everyday things in life, for example, keeping the fire lit in the fireplace, doing the shopping, cooking small meals, and so forth.*

*"Little things are the heart of the matter, as I see it. Life is made up of little things most of the time. If we can be faithful in little matters, scripture says, God will give us greater things to do. I believe that it is just as important to wash the laundry peacefully and to the best of our ability as it is to exercise what might be more publicly esteemed duties in Church or state. It is the love with which we do things, not the actions themselves, that make them holy.*

*"Some years ago I had a spiritual vision. I am not given to visions ordinarily, or any other unusual spiritual experiences for that matter. I find it more practical to do the duties of one's state in life as a way of responding to God than seeking out unusual spiritual phenomena. Having said that, I did see, at least in my mind's eye, a woman dressed in widow's weeds. I knew in my heart that she was to play a significant role in my life. I did not obsess about trying to find her but simply continued on with the duties of my state. When I visited the cathedral in this area*

*at the request of a colleague, to speak during the season of Lent, it was simply because I was invited to do so. I find God's will as much in what others say and do as in the commands of state and Church leaders.*

*"Imagine my surprise when I gazed down from the ornate carved wooden pulpit and saw you, a young woman in widow's garb, sitting in the front row. Your face and bearing were identical to the woman in my vision from years before. I'm not sure if anyone noticed, but it distracted me so much that I needed to pause for a moment and catch my breath. What was God saying to me? How was I to proceed?"*

*"Dawn is rapidly approaching and I am going to try to sleep a little. In the morning I am scheduled to go on my appointed rounds to visit the sick and the poor. Some say that this is not appropriate work for a bishop, but I say that it is perhaps the most important ministry of all.*

*"Stay strong my daughter. You and I and Jesus will work all this out together.*

*+ Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva"*



*Lake Annecy today, where the Salesian family was birthed.*

## CHAPTER 5 - FRANCE

It can take weeks to receive mail, often much longer. The widow was grateful that the housekeeper or her father-in-law did not censor or steal her mail. Perhaps they simply couldn't be bothered with looking at it

Jane de Chantal recorded the amount of food stuffs available in the pantry. She would next look at the finances and try to make an accurate accounting of them. The housekeeper did not appear to be happy with anything she was doing, but Jane de Chantal was trying to keep her focus more on the *attitude* with which she did her tasks than on what other people thought of her. She was gradually moving into a new spiritual direction relationship with Francis de Sales but first had to extricate herself from a very unhealthy relationship with her present spiritual director. The letters from the Bishop of Geneva greatly encouraged her and provided strategies for her to think about the way she was living. She still held great resentment for the man who killed her husband but was trying, at least in the higher part of her soul as Bishop Francis would say, to choose to forgive what *may* have been an accident.

*"My dear Bishop Francis de Sales,*

*"Your letters fill me with joy. I feel like at last I have someone to whom I can open my heart freely. As I mentioned briefly when we met at the cathedral during your Lenten talks, I have been receiving spiritual direction from a local priest who had me so tied up in knots in the name of holiness that I was worse than before going to him for spiritual direction. I will speak more about that later.*

*"Please allow me to share a story of my spiritual vision in response to the vision you spoke about. Like you, my spirituality has a very practical bent to it. I am drawn to the sick and the poor and a simple life, but my state as a baroness pulls me in an opposite direction many times. For this reason I have never really sought out visions or other kinds of what might be thought of as mystical experiences. When I had my vision I didn't know how to respond to it. What I saw before me was a bearded man dressed as a bishop. He had a very slight cast in one eye and a gentle smile. I was not so much frightened by the vision as confused by it. In my heart I knew that this man would play a significant role in my life. How could this be? I didn't know him and my circumstances would not incline me in the direction of interacting with bishops even though my brother is one.*

*"I went to the cavernous cathedral about a half-hour early in order to have some quiet time to pray. My spiritual director insisted that I recite a long list of prayers, both in the morning and the evening. The prayers are verbal and, might I say, boring and discouraging. My director left no room in my life to talk simply to the God that I am searching for. Not only that, my director insisted that I make a vow never to discuss my spiritual life with anyone else. He did allow a little latitude in that area when he was out of town. Then I might briefly talk about what was in my heart to another. That permissible latitude is how I had the courage to approach you after your first Lenten talk here, and to share a very little bit about myself with you.*

*"Like you, I became disoriented when I looked up at the pulpit in the cathedral and saw you enter it. You have the spiritual energy of a very ordinary person who is dressed in the robes of a bishop. It was difficult to see because of the darkness of the cathedral and your distance from me, but I knew in my heart exactly who you were. Because of this recognition of the person I had seen in my vision years before, I had additional courage to speak with you.*

*"I don't know how to discern such things, but I believe that our good God may be inviting me to transition from my present spiritual director to you as my spiritual director. You are a bishop and busy about many things--trying to run a diocese during a time of religious wars and persecution. I'm not completely sure that you even do the ministry of spiritual direction. I have learned from my brother that just because someone is a priest does not make him a spiritual director automatically. He said that spiritual direction is a ministry given by the Holy Spirit to a variety of men and women. I was told that many times devout monastics, monks and nuns, are often excellent spiritual directors. My brother, whom I believe you may have met, longs for the day when men and women may more and more do spiritual direction freely. Spiritual direction is a gift in the Church, he tells me, to build everyone up. Somehow it has been relegated to the clergy primarily, and they are often not well trained or gifted in this area.*

*"It is clear to me, Bishop Francis, that you are a kind, gifted, and compassionate person. Do you do spiritual direction? If so, may I speak with you about seeing you for spiritual direction? My present painful situation has been made worse by my present spiritual director, I fear. My feelings of anxiety, guilt, resentment, and oppression have increased. I am afraid to make a transition from him to you. What about the vows he insisted that I take? Do these prohibit me from speaking with you freely? Must I continue to rattle off prayer after prayer twice daily? Who can dispense me from these vows?*

*"Speaking of rattling, I hear the rattle of keys in the hallway. That means that the mistress of this house--and of my father-in-law--is locking up for the night. In a castle like this it is hard to lock everything up, but the most important rooms, such as the storeroom and great hall, are locked nightly. I must see about banking the fire for the night. My children are asleep and I will be soon as well.*

*"Awaiting your next letter, grateful for your time, and making at least an attempt to be patient and abandoned to life's slow processes, I remain your spiritual daughter,*

*Baroness Jane de Chantal"*

## CHAPTER 6 - AIRBORNE

My flights to and from Asia, and sometimes for destinations in the United States, typically involve an adventure of some sort. Flying to China this time around was no exception. I like window seats on airplanes and had one for the domestic portion of my trip—the flight from Allentown Pennsylvania to Chicago. I'm not very comfortable with high places but as long as a flight attendant is nearby I enjoy looking out the window. If they put airplane windows on high mountains I think I would be fine--but I would still need someone offering me beverages or little bags of pretzels just like they do in economy class, the way monks usually fly.

The seat next to me was empty, and the third seat over next to the aisle was occupied by a kindly-looking Korean man dressed in a business suit. He was about fifty years of age and seemed to be a gentle spirit. It's probably the only thing that saved him! A tall lady with a tower of blonde hair put some items into the overhead compartment and then flung something down on the seat next to me. I looked down and, to my horror, a furry black thing looked back at me with enormous coal-black eyes. It quivered like a bowl full of electrified licorice. I tried to jump up but my seat belt prevented me from doing so. This was probably for the best because I would have bumped my head.

"Oh she won't hurt you," explained the fifty-something year old lady as she picked "Precious" up and settled herself into the seat next to me. She asked the flight attendant for a bowl of water and proceeded to take her own medications and then give some of it to Precious. I'm not a big fan of pharmaceutical medications but know that they have their place and help many people. My personal preference, both for wellness and therapeutic treatment, is nutraceuticals—medications made from natural ingredients like herbs, vitamins, minerals, and whole foods. Just because something is natural doesn't mean that it can't harm you, but my reading of the scientific literature suggests to me that risks are much lower with natural products, but I digress.

My seat mate asked me if I was retired—which implied, at least to me, that she thought I was old. I told her that I was not retired. When she asked what I did for a living I did not want to get into a health-related discussion, so I did the logical thing—I told her that I worked in a sauerkraut factory. I don't think she totally bought the idea but it didn't stop her from talking. I came to learn that Precious was a "trained therapy dog—but I didn't take her to the classes." Maybe the little beast got her "training" online!

After being airborne for about an hour, the woman next to me got up to use the restroom. In the process she knocked Precious' water bowl all over the Korean gentleman in the aisle seat. He stood up and, in a very dignified way, dried himself off while smiling politely. In the process Precious hopped onto my lap as her mistress was saying, "Stay Precious."

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," I responded, while mentally practicing my hand at heaving Precious into first class if the need arose.

About an hour later I stood up to use the restroom. This time *I* was the one who knocked Precious' water all over the Korean man. He stood up and dried himself off once again, but it was easy to see that his smile took more of an effort this time around. Several people in the airplane gasped when the second drenching occurred and one woman whispered in New York-accented English, "Ya know, they must be takin' turns." I was so startled by what I did that I didn't say anything, but when I locked myself in the restroom I began to laugh uncontrollably. When we were leaving the plane, I shook the gentleman's hand and thanked him for his patience.



Earlier in the flight he was speaking English but at this point he was making believe that he didn't understand the language. I suppose it was safer for him that way. Yet it made Brother Francis wonder about him.



*The statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance, the Black Madonna, in front of which Francis de Sales was released from his spiritual crisis.*

## CHAPTER 7 – PENNSYLVANIA

Gunshots echoed through the mountains. The members of the community were used to hearing these noises during hunting season. Right after the celebration of Thanksgiving the gunshots would begin. Sometimes they sounded just a little too close for comfort. It saddened some of the members to think about the deer that were killed, but it gladdened them to know that some people were eating better because of this. Some of the monastics were vegetarians, as was Abbot Francis, and some were not. A few monastic communities make it a part of their rule of life that all members of the community be vegetarian. In the Salesian tradition this is left up to the individual.

Liberty of spirit is a foundational teaching of St. Jane de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales. Whenever possible the individual monastic is encouraged, after consultation with his or her spiritual director, to arrive at life decisions that are mature, healthy, and life-giving, as long as they basically are in harmony with one's state of life.

Sister Jane de Chantal would sometimes think about her foundress and namesake--St. Jane de Chantal--when she heard the hunters firing their guns. The loss of St. Jane's husband, the Baron, radically transformed her life and, because she made the very best of that situation, hundreds of thousands of people through the centuries since have been positively influenced through her. Sister Jane knew that Salesian spirituality does not hold that God sends bad things to teach people lessons. She also understood well the teaching that God will meet us in whatever circumstance of life we find ourselves in. So Sister Jane admired God's creative use of a tragedy in the life of her foundress as a way of enriching the lives of many others.

Madam Wu stood at the kitchen counter and chopped vegetables. She was making her trademark vegetarian egg rolls. There was plenty of leftover turkey for dinner for the carnivores, and the vegetarian egg rolls plus the mashed potatoes, salad, and multi-grain bread would be fine for those who did not eat meat. Effie Wu had explained to the community members and guests that her Chinese husband told her that egg rolls were not really Chinese food. The truth be told, Madam Wu liked American Chinese food more than she likes the real Asian Chinese food. It probably had something to do with the additives and preservatives that Westerners are so used to. God deliver us from healthy food she thought, and smiled to herself.

Sister Jane peacefully organized the materials for the salad and began to reheat the left overs. The two women worked in companionable silence, a monastic tradition.

"Madam Wu, would I be disturbing your quiet recollection if I talked to you for a few moments?"

"Not at all, Sister, I'm happy to have a little private time with you. Community life is nice but there's not always much private time with the individual members."

"It's about our abbot, Brother Francis. I understand that your husband generously orchestrated the circumstances whereby Brother Francis could have a place to stay while visiting China this time around. He is staying with Mr. Wu's cousin in the Fujian Province, correct?"

"That's right Sister Jane. Tian has cousins all over Asia from what I understand. This cousin is a widow lady with a small apartment adjacent to her modest home. Her name is Ming, or Ping, or something like that. She uses 'Theresa' for her Western name so that's how I think of her. I understand that her Chinese name means 'bright' The Chinese have such beautiful and meaningful names." The middle-aged blonde lady smiled as she thought of her dear husband.

"Brother Francis has been studying the Mandarin language for close to four years now. He has mentioned that what he needs at this point is any person he can speak Mandarin with. I

understand that Theresa is a Mandarin speaker and that the area in which she lives is a Mandarin-speaking part of China."

"Theresa is a wonderful person. She's had a life of struggle and deprivation. She lost her husband when she was very young and had to raise her children single-handedly. Fortunately, she has the help of an extended family. Christians are the minority in China but Theresa is a Christian and attributes any strength she has to her faith. Happily, she respects all spiritual traditions and has dear friends who are Daoists and Buddhists. Through long years of toil and saving, she now has a modest dwelling and adult children who help her. Taking Brother Francis in is her way of thanking God for getting through those hard times."

"I don't have the gift of spiritual intuition that you do, Madam Wu, but I have a feeling that there is more to Brother Francis' trip to China this time around than his desire to strengthen his Mandarin speaking skills. I don't mean to pry, but I am concerned for our abbot's safety, so if there is anything that you are comfortable sharing with me about Brother Francis' present circumstances I would be grateful to hear it."

"I know that you are the prioress of the community and therefore in charge when Abbot Francis is away, Sister. I also know that your community members are very close to one another. I, too, have a sense that there is more to this trip than meets the eye. I asked my husband Tian about this intuitive sense of mine and he knew better than to avoid answering it." The blond woman smiled peacefully again as she thought about her husband. Now in her late fifties, Madam Wu was of medium height and had just a few extra pounds to contend with. The tiny silver cross she wore around her neck symbolized her belief that any gift of intuition she had was a gift from God."

"Please don't keep me in suspense; what did your husband say?"

"I'm sorry, Sister Jane. I was just thinking about Tian and missing him a little bit. Yes, he told me that there were some very old documents involved in this trip and that there was a mystery as to how they made their way from France to China. He made some vague references to a hermit who lived in China and the death of the last person to be in possession of these documents. How that all relates to Brother Francis I am not sure."

## CHAPTER 8 - FRANCE

*“My very dear daughter,*

*“Your God-given vocations, first as a wife and mother, and now as a widow, enrich us all. You have wisdom and experience from those roles that many others in the Church do not possess. Perhaps there will come a day when this wisdom will be more widely shared, but for now I encourage you to continue on with your desire for patience and courage. You are already exercising these virtues well and, when we respond mindfully to what life presents us with, we continue to grow in the life of virtue.*

*“You asked several most important questions in last week's letter. I think it would be helpful if we could meet to discuss the questions you presented to me. It is possible that the vows your spiritual director encouraged you to make can be dispensed. It may be that they were never even really valid in the first place, given the state of your soul at the time they were taken, and a possible lack of inner freedom to make healthy choices.*

*“Yes, I do engage in the ministry of spiritual direction, but life does not present me with much time, so sessions with people are necessarily infrequent. Much of my spiritual direction is done by letter. In a sense, we have already created a spiritual direction relationship through our letters.*

*“There is a popular custom, which I consider spiritually unhealthy, wherein people do excessive fasting or even whip their bodies to the point of bleeding. This kind of physical pain has somehow become associated with loving God. The God I have come to know does not want us to be in pain. The age-old question as to why pain exists at all is still something I struggle with. I am sure of one thing, however, that life presents us with enough pain. We do not need to seek out any additional pain.*

*“I am not suggesting that occasional fasting or the mortification of our willfulness is not a good thing. I believe these practices have their place in the spiritual life, but that they need to be utilized sparingly, and with accountability to a trusted friend or spiritual director. I would like to talk about your view of such practices, given that the spiritual direction you have received of late may have been harsher than necessary. Dare I say it, unhealthy?*

*“My suggestion regarding mortification is that you eat what is presented to you with a grateful heart. If something is likely to make you sick do not eat it. If the smallest piece is closest to you as the plate is being passed take that gratefully. If a larger piece is closest to you as the plate comes your way, accept that gratefully. The less of our willfulness there is in these small matters, the more God's permissive will can reign freely in our lives. Let us focus upon being people of inner strength, even if our physical bodies may be weak.*

*“Your letters are filled with anxious thoughts. This is quite understandable given your circumstances. Unfortunately, anxiety can be the biggest obstacle to a spiritual life. Jesus invites us to have confidence in all matters – admittedly not always an easy thing to do. He promises to be with us in everything, and even showed us this by living out a very human life himself. Joseph and Mary did much the same. The holy family listened for the will of God and lived it out in a family unit as have you. Sadly, many people believe that it is only monastics and the clergy who are truly close to God. This is not theologically sound. God comes to us as we live out the duties of our state in life, be it married, single, clergy, or monastic life.*

*“You have been gifted, my dear daughter, with a very fine mind. Unfortunately, the evil one can turn our gifts against us. That mind of yours seems to be looking for a reason as to why your husband was killed--even to the point of suspecting foul play. I have no way of knowing*

*whether the Baron was intentionally or unintentionally shot. I encourage you to limit the amount of time you ruminate about this topic to perhaps a quarter of an hour a day. If you find your mind going back to that topic later in the day, and you most likely will, remind yourself that you have already thought about the matter and move on to another topic. Admittedly, this takes a great deal of self-discipline, but I'm sure you have it.*

*“Our spiritual and intellectual gifts are given to us to build up other people, and not primarily for our own benefit. Using your fine mind to create strategies for you to grow beyond your present circumstances is a much more productive thing to do. The evil one wants to snare you with all sorts of anxious and depressing thoughts and feelings through the use of the gift of your mind in an inappropriate way. We often picture the evil one as a devil with a pitchfork and horns, but it is a much more subtle experience than that. We often don't see the evil one standing right in front of us or whispering into our ears. He sometimes gets to us through our very gifts!*

*“My wish is to empower you, not to treat you like an empty-headed person who, because she is a woman, is not to be respected. Think about the way Jesus interacted with women in the Gospel stories. He did so with respect and warmth. I hope that I can follow him in this way. I also hope that we will meet again before very long. Penned with grateful affection from,*

*+ Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva”*



*The founding of the Visitation of Holy Mary, a depiction created for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Visitation of Holy Mary. The biblical visitation of Mary to Elizabeth creates the backdrop.*

## CHAPTER 9 - FRANCE

*“My dear Bishop Francis de Sales,*

*“How our recent meeting strengthened my heart! The experience here at my father-in-law's castle, especially within the context of any civil lack of status in terms of finance, has been very disempowering. Your words, in association with the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, are life-giving to me. I have never been exposed to a spirituality that has been presented so simply, practically, and joyfully.*

*“What a wonderful relief to be released from my vow of secrecy concerning my spiritual life. I can now speak with you with increasing freedom of heart and mind. It has also been extremely freeing to be released from the vow to pray so very many prayers both in the morning and evening, with little or no concern for the true and spontaneous prayer my heart might utter were it given half a chance.*

*“My four children are growing well despite the circumstances. Yes, they would probably be happier in the home of other relatives than in this dreary and negative place. My oldest is now a young man and I keep trying to shift him away from his fascination with dueling. The girls are more and more interested in pretty clothing and ribbons for their hair. That is fine as far as it goes, but I hope that they can see value in the more important things of life, such as one's interior life.*

*“I know that I belong to God, yet family members and friends keep pushing me towards the arms of one suitor or another. From a worldly point of view it is foolhardy for me not to remarry. My children and I would be far more financially secure and we would be able to move to a place where there would not be so much animosity or intolerance toward us. You have made it clear, my dear Bishop, that God loves us all intensely and that one is not closer to God in religious life than in marriage. I'm beginning to understand that it is more a matter of discerning where God may be inviting us to than where we ourselves would like to go. I remain extremely conflicted about my future. Where is it that God would like me to go when my children are no longer in need of my care – when they are off at school somewhere, or living with relatives, or even out on their own?*

*“If I marry again I fear my heart would not really be in the marriage, and that would be a lack of kindness toward my new spouse. It would also not be very honest, as I believe that I would be using him to make my life a bit more comfortable. That does not seem to me to be an honorable thing to do, but the people who surround me think otherwise. I already belong to God and, thanks to Your Excellency's guidance, I am beginning to understand the healthier aspects of spirituality. If I were to live out this relationship with God as a vowed religious, I am not certain that this would be a good choice either. Many of the religious orders in existence today emphasize corporal penances, fasting, various mortifications, the wearing of hair shirts, and the like.*

*“I have been trying to live in accord with God's permissive will, and the things that come along from day to day in life. I no longer seek out penances, nor do I reject unpleasant things that come along. I simply try to do what I can to deal with the matters which I like as well as those which I don't like. I am becoming more and more interested in what God wants than in what I want. I see people constantly trying to rearrange life. They do this in small ways --by being very fussy about what they eat, rearranging furniture, demanding only certain styles of clothing, and so forth. What do these things really matter in the long run? In the end, such*



*people tend to be very easily frustrated and unhappy. Life never seems to give them just exactly what they want. What a surprise!*

*“Life is unfair. That doesn't mean that we need to be morose about it. There is a lot of joy in life if we can be content with what we have and do not spend our time trying to adjust and rearrange everything.*

*“I love the beauty of Lake Annecy, and can picture the ducks gliding along the water so peacefully there. I rejoice in the melting glaciers that formed that lake as one of the largest bodies of water in France so long ago. It seems to me, dear Bishop, that I am taking to your spiritual suggestion the way these ducks take to the water on that beautiful lake. May I never waste your time or effort.*

*“Until we speak again, I remain your grateful daughter,*

*Baroness Jane de Chantal”*

## CHAPTER 10 - CHICAGO

The flight from Allentown Pennsylvania to Chicago, if we skip the part about Precious the dog and the Korean gentleman, went well. I arrived about three hours early for my connecting flight to China. While looking without success for the flight listing on a large electronic board, a woman dressed in a flight attendant's uniform, about forty-five years of age with rich mahogany skin, walked up to the board and searched for her flight as well.

"Do you see the China flight listed yet?" I asked.

"Not yet, sir, but it will be up soon. I'm working that flight. Don't know what section of the plane yet but look me up when we board." She said all this with a twinkle in her eye and I could tell that she was someone who enjoyed a good joke.

A few hours later I made my way through the jetport, trying not to feel like part of a cattle herd. I entered the aircraft and a uniformed gentleman pointed down a long aisle indicating my assigned seat. Before I moved very far along, an arm reached out from the galley and gently pulled me into the small curtained room. It was the flight attendant from a few hours earlier.

"I told them all you're my uncle," she said with a laugh and a bang of her hand on the stainless steel counter. "We'll have some fun!"

"Sounds good to me," I responded as I pictured my reddish complexion being complemented by her mahogany one. I can get sunburn just sitting too close to a reading lamp.

A little later, when the passengers were a little more settled but before takeoff, another flight attendant came by and said, "Oh, you're Harriet's uncle. Welcome aboard."

I was about to ask her who Harriet was when I remembered my conversation in the galley and caught myself, so I said, "Isn't she a wonderful girl!"

"The best!"

Shortly after that another flight attendant came by and moved me to a window seat with an empty seat between me and the passenger in the aisle seat. *Hope he doesn't have a dog!*

"Just let us know if you need anything at all, Doctor O'Neil, and it's yours. We'll make sure your vegetarian meals find you even though your seat was changed."

"Brother Francis" had become my name in my late teen years upon entering religious life, but when I fly on long trips I often have natural medicine with me and sometimes I am in places where being a Catholic Christian monk is not very endearing to others. I never deny my vocation, but put copies of my natural medicine and clinical psychology licenses in my baggage with my medicine so anyone who sees my supplies will be less likely to question them. "Doctor O'Neil" works well too since it is also truly my name.

After about eighteen flying hours, and feeling like I usually do at that point—dirty and tired—we deplaned. As I was leaving, Harriet was busy about her work of helping to bring the plane back into some sort of order. I went up to her and gave her a hug. "Tell the family that we've got to get together. We always say that but we never do."

Harriet loved it, and for a moment, we actually felt like uncle and niece. *What a beautiful world it could be... Then again, was she up to something? Why was I thinking like that? She wouldn't hurt a fly.*

It filled me with great joy to have Tian Wu's cousin Theresa and her friends welcome me outside of baggage claim. Theresa's hair was more black than silver and she wears it in a short curly perm—a kind of Asian-Afro. Some of her friends have enough money, others have very little. Somehow they managed to get hold of a van and pick me up when I flew in from the United

States. They whisked me off to lunch at a beautiful Chinese restaurant. Since night and day were reversed for me now, mainland China being twelve hours ahead of United States time, what I really was interested in was a shower and some down time. Like many cultures, the Chinese people express their hospitality through food. We shared a wonderful meal and I managed not to fall asleep and drop into my egg drop soup.

A quote from the famous Swiss Analyst Carl Jung came to mind as I celebrated life with these wonderful people, "I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become." Some of the things that happened to these folks were not so good, but it seemed to make them smile all the more--and make them even stronger. Poverty and sickness are never strangers to the people I often find myself associating with both in the States and in China, yet people go on. I marvel at the strength and courage of people who, for any number of reasons, need to apply for disability financial help. I do disability evaluations on a regular basis and marvel at the *ability* to deal with day to day traumas of those often thought of as disabled.

As we drove to Theresa's house in the van, someone quoted the ancient Chinese sage Lao Tzu as saying, "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be." Because I am a Christian, my master is Jesus. I believe he is God and is within us--and that God is beyond being a he or a she. I cannot help but see echoes of his teaching in the philosophies of many of these wonderful Asian sages. It has been my life's work to rid the world of prejudice in any of its many subtle and sinister forms. Being able to relate freely to people of various cultures and spiritualities has become my greatest joy.

You are probably beginning to grasp the fact that my flights usually involve some sort of unplanned adventure. My plane was late because there was a bit of a riot when I was transferring airplanes in China. My next plane was about four hours late and we were not given updates or explanations as to why. All of a sudden a Chinese gentleman stood up on his chair and began to yell in Mandarin. My Mandarin is far from the best but I understood him to be expressing his anger about not even getting an explanation or an "I'm sorry" from anyone concerning the delay of our airplane. On the other hand, given my Mandarin challenges, he could have simply been excitedly ordering a pizza.

While he was in the process of yelling, a woman stood up and began saying similar things. The next thing I knew, there were several hundred people standing and yelling. The little bit of Mandarin I knew went right out the window in this cacophony of sounds and voices. After about twenty minutes of this a representative of our airline arrived to speak with us. The group wrote down their demands, which included an apology and a discount. During this process a gentle voice came over the public address system announcing that our plane was ready to board. The entire crowd shouted, "No!" They wanted their demands to be met in writing and then they would get on the plane. That is exactly what happened.

During our relatively brief flight several flight attendants came over and apologized for the uproar in the airport. I suppose, being the only Westerner in the crowd, I stuck out a little bit. I smiled and let them know that this sort of thing can happen anywhere. I told them that I was grateful to be among their people and thanked them for their service. I think I practiced some pretty good diplomacy during that flight.

The mystery of how some centuries-old parchments would be waiting for me when we arrived at Theresa's home had been pulling at the corners of my mind for days. Tired as I was, I was still more than excited about getting my hands on these texts--which were purported to be written by the very hands of our founders, St. Jane de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales.



*The mountains of China, wrapped in mist in the background.*

## CHAPTER 11 – PENNSYLVANIA

Madam Wu was now absentmindedly chopping vegetables at a furious pace. Her plain gold wedding band on her moderately pudgy finger dripped with the moisture sprayed from her fast-moving silver knife.

"What is it, Effie? I hope I didn't speak out of turn by asking you for any information you might have about Brother Francis and his trip to China, and his staying at your husband's cousin's apartment," questioned Sister Jane, with mild concern in her voice.

"Not at all, Sister. It's just that I try not to use my spiritual gift of intuition when it relates to family or close friends. Yet sometimes it's necessary and then I let down my guard, so to speak. I found myself wondering about those old parchments and where they came from originally. I'm curious as to how they were passed on from person to person over the centuries and if it's risky that they are landing in Brother Francis' hands."

"Effie, do you think Brother Francis is in any danger?"

"I don't know, but I do believe that there are no accidents. I think it is God's will that these documents are now, according to Tian's cousin, being given to Brother Francis. If it becomes clear that there is danger involved, I will certainly let down my guard and use my gifts. I may also enlist the help of another who is in our midst."

Sister Jane looked startled. She stopped refilling the paper napkin holder and gave Madam Wu her "nun stare." Her tone was curious as she asked, "Another intuitive is in our midst? Who might that be?" Sister Jane was fairly sure she already knew the name of the person Madam Wu had in mind.

"Why it's Postulant Clare, of course. That young woman is profoundly gifted with spiritual insight yet she is too shy to use it publicly. Her difficulty in hearing has probably heightened her ability to read people nonverbally, and even spiritually."

Clare was contentedly sitting up on her bed doing some *Lectio Divina*. This monastic practice of slow and prayerful meditative spiritual reading is something that monks and nuns do on a daily basis. The point was not to get to the end of the book or learn anything, but it was rather a way to communicate with God. In a deeply receptive frame of mind, a phrase or word might touch the heart profoundly. At other times it may lead to a moment of insight, a resolution to do something, or to change in some way. Clare was presently praying with a book called *Bond of Perfection* by Wendy Wright. This wonderful book tells the story of the spiritual friendship of St. Jane de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales. It gives a profound insight into the personality of each person and the beautiful way in which they interacted to create an entire spiritual family, existing down to the present day.

Albeit still a postulant, Clare was one of the newest members of the world-wide Salesian family. She had spent some time at the Salesian Monastery in Pennsylvania months before as an observer and now was back doing one year of postulancy. During that time she wears the garb of a secular person, keeps her original name, and lives in the community with the idea in mind of possibly joining the monastery in a more formal way, if such continues to seem appropriate on the part of Clare and the community toward the end of this period of candidacy.

Her mind was playing tricks on her again she thought. When she was here as an observer she blurted out her concerns about Sister Scholastica and a past that just might catch up with the nun to Sister Jane during a private conference. Since that is indeed what happened, Clare was not only shaken by the experience but concerned that this might somehow become a strike against

her if she decided to apply for entrance into the community as a postulant. It turned out favorably. Sister Jane had just enough of a "heads up" to allow her to think clearly and deal with a very important situation concerning Sister Scholastica and her past. Even this very hesitant use of Clare's gifts had been a plus for the community.

The postulant didn't want anything to do with her gift of intuition, or whatever it was. On the other hand, Salesian spirituality encourages people to be open to the gifts God gives them and to use them for God's people. She longed to do God's will more than her own, or at least have that just desire grow stronger within her. When she thought of her abbot, Brother Francis, she was lately seeing the face of his namesake, St. Francis de Sales, superimposed over him. At other times she saw the face of their woman foundress, St. Jane does Chantal, superimposed over him. She felt he was in danger. Even though she could not hear things very well, she could "hear" a gunshot-like sound go off within her. Clare wondered if this greater level of monastic solitude and silence was getting to her. Maybe this was not a healthy lifestyle for her. She didn't want to face that if that were the case. Clare remembered another postulant who was at the monastery during her stay as an observer, someone who wanted to stay but who was obviously unhappy, and whose spiritual director told her she really needed to leave the community. As much as this woman did not want to hear it, the community had to ask her to leave and find her way to God in a way that would make her happier.

*Dear God, please don't let that happen to me. I truly want to stay here. Yet I know that I am called to seek your will more than my own will. The lower part of my soul wants its own way. I understand that this is natural and that these promptings from our self-centered side will go away—but only at death. What a thought! Be that as it may, I choose to embrace your holy will with the higher part of my soul. I'm trying not to resist anything that this life calls me to. The only bit of resistance that is within me centers on the use of what might be a gift of intuition. I was not even aware that I was resisting this until I started speaking with you, my good God. I suppose it's something that would be good to talk about in spiritual direction. Sister Jane, our prioress, has been serving as my spiritual director. I find it embarrassing to bring up this topic but will do so. The last thing I want to do is call attention to me. Monastics are supposed to retain their own personalities but also blend in, not try to make themselves appear special. You know my heart, Jesus, and so you know that I don't want to appear special. It's actually quite the opposite. Sister Jane may not understand that, however. This situation calls for trusting you and I need to remember that it is the Holy Spirit who is the real spiritual director, not the very ordinary human person to whom we speak.*

Perhaps these feelings were a type of monastic growing pains. She couldn't remain a Maria-like character from *The Sound of Music* forever. Maria had to become her true self and so would Clare. The late Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, encourages everyone to be the person he or she is called to be, and not try to be someone else like Mother Teresa or Gandhi. The true self only emerges as the many false selves we create and destroy over our lifetime fall away. It takes real purity of heart, as the desert fathers and mothers call it, to be oneself. Flowing from this purity of heart is often an intuitive gift. Such a gift is clearly seen in the lives of the Christian mystics, as well as Asian teachers of every stripe. Perhaps Clare was more pure of heart than she realized.

## CHAPTER 12 - FRANCE

*“My very dear daughter,*

*“During these months exchanging letters of spiritual direction back and forth, and our occasional visits, I believe that I have come to know you well. You are dispensed, and I say this more as you are spiritual friend than as a bishop, from the vows you made in a state of un-freedom, prompted and made worse by your former spiritual director. A vow is always made to God, not to another human being. You are completely at liberty to speak with me freely about your spiritual life and can certainly pray the way your heart prompts you to, rather than being burdened with a multitude of rote prayers.*

*“You told me that you know you belong to God. Your family and friends keep trying to marry you off to someone, but you will have none of it. At the same time, you know that you and your children would be a lot more secure if you had a husband. Our true security comes only from God, and if we make a choice out of fear rather than out of love, it will not be fruitful. If we make a mistake, however, or a superior makes one for us, it will still be fruitful. Let your heart be at peace. Do not be afraid of making the wrong choice, but rather, of making a choice with the wrong motive.*

*“I so appreciate the fact that you understand that we are all called to holiness, and that we find true intimacy with God by doing the duties of our state in life. Being a bishop is no holier than being a wife, yet, it is clear to me that you feel drawn to some sort of monastic life. The religious orders which are most popular today emphasize external penances a great deal. My sense is that God wants me, and the people to whom I minister, to emphasize more internal penances. Dealing with what life hands us is the key to holiness.*

*“There we have it—no husband and no appropriate religious order. What is one left to do? Maybe it's not up to you or me. Perhaps our good God has something in mind that neither of us completely understands yet. Something is germinating in my heart and I will share the idea with you when we next meet. I know that patience is not your favorite virtue, I'm not all that fond of it myself, but waiting a few more weeks until we are able to talk face to face will give both of us time to reflect, as well as the spaciousness in our hearts and minds for the Holy Spirit to operate more clearly.*

*“Have you thought about where your children will live or go to school should life take you away from living with them? It appears that you have done a wonderful job of raising the four of them and that they are now getting older. No matter where your life takes you, it is a parental duty to help a child plan for his or her future and to be there for them. Because you live such a simple life, I believe you have managed to save a few coins to help them in that regard.*

*“No one knows better than you do that worldly realities have to be dealt with. You take care of the supplies and the bookkeeping at your father-in-law's castle. This very much goes against your grain. You are a good administrator but do not like doing it. I have seen your soul soften in this area. You are now able to perform these duties with a more peaceful heart. This is surely a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence within you. I am sure that God will use the talents you have, and the skills you have developed during these years, for something which will bear much fruit one day.*

*“I continue to be criticized by my Church colleagues because the sermons I preach are simple and without a lot of Latin and Greek quotations sprinkled throughout them. It is my desire to talk to the hearts of people and have those hearts be set aflame for the love of God. It doesn't seem likely to me that this will occur with much ease if all they hear are big words and fancy*

*sounding ideas. When I was a missionary the printing press had barely been invented. I used to print up little tracts to give out to people because it was dangerous to speak freely about the Gospel. One time some people who were not very favorable toward me found my printing press and destroyed it. They didn't destroy me, however. I just kept right on doing what I thought God wanted of me. I can't say that I felt wonderful. The lower part of my soul was actually pretty low, so to speak. I acted out of the higher part of my soul, where choice and will reside.*

*“My dear daughter, I tell you these things so that you will understand that I am a human being like everyone else. As we continue to get to know one another, you will see my faults more and more clearly. As the Holy Spirit illuminates our hearts and minds, we all tend to see ourselves more clearly also, blemishes and all. As you see my blemishes, that will help you to relate to me more as a spiritual friend and peer than as a bishop.*

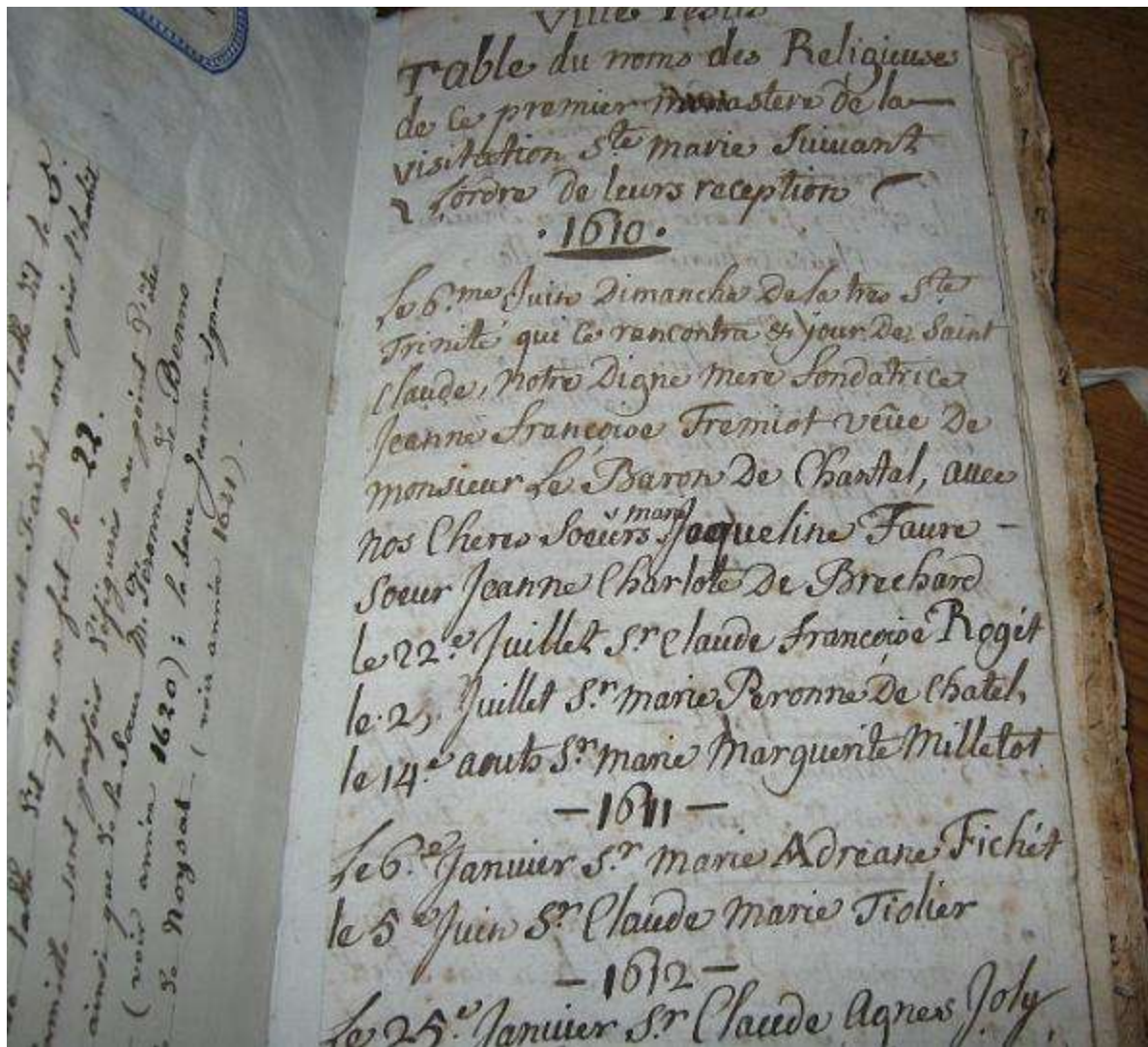
*“It is time to close this letter. I take what scraps of time I can find to work on writing a spiritual book these days. It is called Introduction to a Devout Life. A Jesuit found letters I had written to some people who came to me for spiritual direction. Most of them were written to my own cousin. The Jesuit urged me to have these letters published in book form. I am editing them at the moment for possible publication and only doing this because I believe that God's will is found not only in the hierarchy of the Church, but also in the suggestions of friends and loved ones, as well as in the promptings of our own hearts. There will really be nothing new in this book. I have simply rearranged ancient teachings, something like a flower girl who takes the same types of flowers and rearranges them, creating a new look or a new expression of the beauty of nature each time.*

*“I share these things with you, my very dear daughter, so that you will see my humanity and perhaps get a glimpse of God's goodness and strength within me. It is not me, but Christ in me that makes anything useful of me and my poor words such as these.*

*“It will be a joy to meet with you and share with you my sketchy ideas about our future.”  
Affectionately yours in the One who strengthens us,*

*+ Francis, Bishop of Geneva”*





French manuscript from 1610 containing the names of the first Visitation nuns.

## CHAPTER 13 - FRANCE

*“My dear Bishop Francis de Sales,*

*“The months are flying by like the clouds in a beautiful blue sky during the summertime. Even the household servants in this dismal castle of my father-in-law comment on the change in my attitude. It used to be that during my morning and evening prayer time I would have them get up and make a fire for me, but no more. I overheard one young servant man recently saying to another, ‘previously Madame de Chantal prayed twice a day and disturbed us all. Now she appears to be in a prayerful state all day long and disturbs no one.’*

*“Your book, Introduction to a Devout Life, is being well received. I understand that people want it translated from the French into other languages. It is eminently practical and geared to people ‘in the world.’ I particularly like the section where you talk about being of good cheer. You pose the question about why anyone would be attracted to Christianity if all the people who practiced it were gloomy. Even though I am surrounded by gloom, rejection, and loss, deep in my heart I have a sense of peaceful joy that no one can take from me. I believe that this is a great gift of God, and I do my best to help others discover this gift which is in them also.*

*“There was a ball held here recently--quite an unusual event. Once again, people were introducing me to this count, that doctor, and the other lawyer. Because, in the lower part of my soul, I remained conflicted, knowing that life would indeed be a lot easier if I would simply marry one of these gentlemen, I fled to my room and took a knife, heated the tip of it in the fire, and branded the name ‘Jesus’ on my chest. This semi-mutilation will now prevent me from wearing the fashionable and slightly low-cut gowns. Perhaps this will end my inner confusion.*

*“After I did that somewhat outrageous act, I came to my senses. I doubt very much that you would approve of such a thing. I can almost hear you telling me that the name of Jesus must be branded in our heart, rather than on the surface of our body. Forgive me, dear Bishop, if I have let my fears and conflicts get out of hand. Forgive me if my zeal for the love of God has become misguided. I share this with you because I want you to know my heart and my soul, both the good of it and the bad of it.*

*“Not long ago when we met, you asked me to go off to the Poor Clare nuns and I said that I would. Then you changed that request and asked me to become Carmelite. Again, I agreed. It was only when you began to share with me your idea for a new type of religious order that my heart truly felt at peace. I didn’t even know the details of your idea but something in me resonated in harmony with just that germ of a thought.*

*“You have much wisdom to share with us all. I know, that in addition to writing the Introduction to a Devout Life, you have also been writing a Treatise on the Love of God. This is your more mystical work, I understand. This material, in my little opinion, needs to be shared with the largest audience possible. Would that the idea you have for some type of new religious community will allow your spirit, I really mean the Holy Spirit working in you, to pass down the gift of this charism for centuries to come.*

*“Your books are rapidly becoming public property, but there are aspects of your heart that only I know about, and I am keeping certain letters apart from our other correspondence because I want to explore them more deeply, reflect upon them more completely, and just let God do with them what God wants to do. I realize that there is a private and very humble side to you. While many bishops enjoy wearing colorful adornments and being given gestures of reverence and respect, you spend your time doing spiritual direction with someone like the likes of me. You are attracted to the sick and the poor, and above all to those who long for a spiritual life. All of*

*these things, while completely consistent with the Gospel, do not make you a very popular prelate in the eyes of your peers.*

*“I understand, my dear spiritual director, that there has even been some talk, from time to time, about your relationship with myself and other women. It seems that no matter what we do, we are at risk for being gossiped about, lied about, or misunderstood. I'm beginning to understand much more clearly you are teaching about keeping one's eyes on our good God, and doing what we think God wants us to do. All of this is to be done out of the love of God, rather than out of what other people may, or may not, think.*

*“It humbles me that you shared with me the struggle you had in dealing with your father's resistance to your own vocation some years ago. That gives me courage. It certainly appears that those struggles have born enormous fruit, of which I am but one grateful recipient.*

*“You mentioned the possibility of my making a vow of charity--vowing to do nothing knowingly and willingly against charity in thought, word, or deed. That is very appealing to me and much more life-giving than the vows my previous spiritual director imposed upon me. My intuition, hopefully coming from the Holy Spirit, suggests to me that this vow of charity may have something to do with the idea you have for forming a new religious institute. I hope that when we meet again we can talk more specifically about what the Spirit of God is suggesting to you. My children continue to flourish in spite of their surroundings and, hopefully, because I have had the grace of my present vocation to be a good mother. Their futures are well provided for now and mine remains open. I try to be like a ball of wax in the hand of God, as you might put it.”*

*“Until we speak again, I remain your grateful daughter,*

*Baroness Jane de Chantal”*

## CHAPTER 14 - CHINA

Reading these handwritten letters from our founder and foundress puts me into an altered state of consciousness. It's like I hurtle back in time to the fifteen hundreds and am in their presence, see them interact, and am filled with the light of grace. What a difference from the plaster saints we were raised with. This woman and man had hearts of flesh and blood. They became holy through life events, not by withdrawing from the challenges of life. This, too, is my call as a contemporary Salesian monk.

Whenever I bring up the question of where these papers came from, Theresa seems to shy away from the topic. Even when we are with a group of her friends, they all become ill at ease when I ask about the person who had these papers before me. I will try again this morning at breakfast.

The table was laden with steaming bowls of a wide variety of food. Some bowls were filled with liquid and some were filled with fruit. A few of my favorites were prominently displayed. These are a type of white steamed buns and small egg custard pies. None of the many family relatives and friends were around. It was just me, Theresa, and the superabundance of food. I still don't know how I can get this woman to keep from cooking so much. I am grateful for the peanut butter that she has around. Sometimes it's hard to take more Chinese food. Being a vegetarian, peanut butter is a good source of protein for me--and I like the taste!

"Theresa, I have been totally absorbed by the letters of our holy mother St. Jane de Chantal and our holy father St. Francis de Sales. Every time I ask you about how these parchments came to you, you avoid the topic. I don't want to put you on the spot, so to speak, but I would love to understand how these documents traveled from over four hundred years ago in France and are now in my hands."

"On the spot?"

"It's just an American saying, Theresa. It means that I don't want to force you into saying or revealing something you don't want to talk about. That's especially important, given the fact that in the Salesian family we encourage liberty of spirit, not force." The words I had printed on the remembrance card that I gave out when I took my solemn vows were from St. Francis de Sales to St. Jane de Chantal. It read: "All through love, nothing through fear."

"Brother Francis, I have been reading about your holy founders and find them to be delightful, very human. The only St. Francis I knew of was St. Francis of Assisi. I had never even heard of St. Jane de Chantal. Their message is so encouraging and so simple. I can fit their teachings into my life so easily. I would like to share with you what I know of the journey of those sacred letters now. Part of my hesitation included the fact that I was just learning about your founders. I read some modern books about them. There was, however, a more important reason for my evasiveness.

"My dear brother, my main hesitation in sharing with you the journey of those letters is because, even though I know very little of the details of their journey, I do know that the last person to possess those letters is now deceased. He was my cousin." She smiled shyly. "Don't start that again, I know you're going to say that I have a million cousins. I know that I probably do and I am grateful for every one of them. This cousin had those letters passed on to him as a young man, from his father I believe."

"Can you tell me more about your cousin, Theresa? Where did he live? How old was he? How did he die?"

"My cousin lived nearby, a journey of a few hours only. He lived in the country with his

wife and children. He was a woodworker. He earned enough to keep his family comfortable and not much beyond that. He was in his forties and a very gentle soul. A few months ago he was out hunting for food for his family and was accidentally shot. As you can imagine, his wife, just about twenty-eight years old, was distraught. She struggles to make sense of her ordeal. I do what I can to be of support to her. It is my hope that the two of you will meet before very long."

The monk's mind could not take in the parallel between St. Jane de Chantal's husband being killed in a hunting accident when she was twenty-eight years of age, and Theresa's cousin having the same experience. The only link between the two women was the letters.

"How many children does she have?"

"She has four living children, and she lost two children around the time of childbirth."

Brother Francis was stunned. His mind began reeling. "Can we visit her soon, Theresa? I would really love to meet her. I am burning with the desire to understand how it came to pass that these letters came to me, and if there is some response I am supposed to be making because I am in possession of them."

Theresa began to cry. "I am very frightened for you, Brother Francis. The last person to possess those letters was killed. Perhaps the same thing will happen to you. I try not to be superstitious but I suppose I am. I would rather have you drop the whole topic. From what I've heard from my cousin Tian in the United States, however, I don't believe you're someone who can just let go of an unsolved mystery, even at the risk of his own life."

"You are getting to know me well in a short time, Theresa. I have always had to follow through on the "question marks" in life. This has gotten me into trouble and some danger at times, but my attitude usually bears good fruit. My approach to the discernment of spirits, to making decisions based on God's designs, suggests to me that we need to look at the *fruit* of our choices. My choices to follow through with mysteries typically lead to good fruit, not rotten fruit, as the Gospel puts it. These fruits include my own inner freedom, or another person's ability to make choices that are in harmony with his or her gifts and desires, or helping a person to become more healthy or happy."

"As you wish, Brother Francis. We can go to the country today and you can meet my cousin and her children. I know, I know, it will be one more cousin in a list of thousands," Theresa said, with the beginning of a smile on her face. Courage was gently replacing her fear.



*Chinese Buddhist temple.*

## CHAPTER 15 - PENNSYLVANIA

The community enjoyed the fruits of the labors of Madam Wu and Sister Jane. The normal monastic custom is to listen to reading during meals, which are taken in silence. In a small community it is often simpler to listen to spiritual, or sometimes health-related, audiotapes. In recent times the monastery had moved up to CDs. At the evening meal this evening they listened to an American woman who became a Tibetan Buddhist nun. Her name is Pema Chodron. She spoke in simple and practical terms about things such as self-forgiveness, assertiveness, the forgiveness of others, and looking at life from a deeper viewpoint. She spoke with humor and gratitude. Her words, while coming from a Buddhist point of view, had a Christian and Salesian flavor. As the community members enjoyed their meal and listened “with the ears of their hearts” as St. Benedict would say, their minds were filled with thoughts that nourished their spirits even more than their bodies.

One of Pema Chodron’s most loved books is called *When Things Fall Apart*. In it she talks about what really matters, things that arise from the depths of the spirit, things that cannot be weighed or measured in a science lab. The woman speaks from her own experience of the painful life events that prompted her to dig more deeply into the reason for existence and the healthiest way to respond to life. Brother Matthew's thoughts turned to ecumenism. Even as a young child, Brother Matthew thought that people were more alike than they were different. He thought the same about groups of people who might join together in the name of a particular religion or philosophy. He held to his own Christian monastic roots, but celebrated all that is held in common among people of goodwill, and respected that which might be different

Sister Scholastica's life had taken her to faraway lands and into very dangerous situations prior to her entering the monastery in her early forties. She dealt with people who spoke different languages and worshiped very differently from her, but she had an ability to see deeply into their hearts. This convinced her of the goodness of all people, even while in the midst of those who were not doing good things. Sometimes the goodness she believed to be within each person had to be taken on faith, but most of the time it was available to her if she simply opened her eyes and her heart.

"Let us bless the Lord," the prioress proclaimed. "And give God thanks," the community responded. This verse and response indicated that it was now time to break silence and enjoy one another's company through conversation.

"I thought it would be nice to chat for a while as we enjoy our dessert," Sister Jane explained to the community. Even our holy father St. Francis de Sales encouraged us to recreate and to relax. Talking meals, and talking desserts, were not frequent, but were also no big surprise when they occurred. Everyone began to chatter about how good the food tasted and how interesting Pema Chodron's book was. After everyone talked for a while, they got up and began clearing the table. The cooks were normally excused from doing the dishes, so Madam Wu and Sister Jane retired to the sunroom to continue their conversation of earlier that afternoon.

Sister Jane collapsed into an old wingback chair covered in orange brocade. "I fear I am beginning to show as much wear and tear as this old chair," she observed jovially.

Madam Wu could identify with the nun. "I've got a few things that creek going myself," she laughed. "I understand that Brother Francis was recently knighted. Can you tell me what that's about?"

"It's true; it's also rather unusual. As you know, Brother Francis is a doctor of natural medicine and a clinical psychologist. He specializes in behavioral medicine and Chinese

medicine. The Medical Order of the Knights Hospitaller became aware of his good work and nominated him for knighthood. They hold "investitures," as they call them, in various countries throughout each year. About a year after his nomination Brother Francis flew to Miami, Florida, and was received into this ancient medical order in a local Maronite Catholic Church and knighted as well."

"The author Dan Brown has provided the world with part fantasy and part fictitious information about the Knights Templar. I believe that the medical knights emerged about fifty years after the Knights Templar; is that correct Sister?"

"Right you are, Madam Wu. The Knights Templar, as I understand it, began in order to protect pilgrims who came to the holy land of Jerusalem as pilgrims. Sad to say, there was bloodshed among various political and religious factions. The Knights Hospitaller then began to offer medical and spiritual care to those who had been wounded or became sick on their journeys."

"The little reading I've done about this topic made it clear that the medical knights took in and treated people of any background, be they of no religion, Jewish, Muslim, or Christian. They also began institutions that we know today as hospitals. Even their symbol of a Maltese, eight-pointed, cross became a Red Cross symbol for the organization that bears that name. I believe that Florence Nightingale had some affiliation with the medical order as well."

"Abbot Francis told us that the group he was knighted with, about thirty-eight women and men strong, was comprised of dentists, conventional physicians, psychologists, chiropractors, herbalists, scientists, and legal experts. All of these people had to take training in natural medicine beyond their traditional training in order to practice in the name of the order."

The Master General of the order held a glinting sword on high and then moved it from one shoulder to the other over Brother Francis as he bestowed knighthood upon him. Both men were now clad in a long black mantle with a large white Maltese cross on the left side of the black cape. He prayed over the newly-knighted monk, asking that God would give the monk the courage to shed his blood for the cause of the order if it be needed. After the Salesian monk and the other men and women with him had been knighted or "damed," as the women's process was called, the Grand Master concluded:

"By the authority delegated to me under the authority of the Grand Council, and in remembrance of God's holy presence, I have transformed you into Knights and Dames. I offer you sovereignty, the cross, and invest you in a habit of little worth. The four arms of the cross stand for the virtues of prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude. The points stand for the Beatitudes that spring from those virtues: spiritual joy; life without malice; repentance over any misdeeds; humility before others; love of justice; mercy; sincerity, and purity of heart--and finally it symbolizes an overall suffering of persecution if need be."

Madam Wu was in awe at what she just "saw" within her spirit. She seemed transfixed. "The medical order is actually older than the Salesian order. We are talking about the twelve hundreds and St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal founded the Salesian family in the fifteen hundreds and sixteen hundreds, correct?"

"Yes, Madam, it seems that our abbot is going back further and further in time. He is truly captivated by the life of the early Christians too. Many people today think that the Church of the fifteen hundreds down to today is the way it always was. Not so, life in the early Church was quite a bit different. It burned with the fire of the Holy Spirit. I know that is something you



know a great deal about my friend. Anyway, the early Christians were dedicated to a life of good works. From time to time they would come together to tell stories from Scripture and the life of Jesus, share the bread and wine, thus experiencing God through the Living Word and the Eucharist. This experience of coming together and sharing, by its very nature, brings forgiveness and healing. I must admit that I long for those days as well. I respect all that the Church stands for but some of its trappings are not necessary for me. Sadly and frighteningly, there are even some who become violent when they think about the Church."

"I suppose monasteries tend to be simpler than parish communities. That doesn't make one better than the other, I realize, but we each *are* called to find our way in accord with whatever path we are drawn to, I suppose." Madam Wu smiled and relaxed in the presence of someone who was becoming a good friend. It was risky to become friends with anyone because anyone could hurt or betray us, even accidentally. Such was the experience of Jesus and many of the saints. If one is human, one is at risk. A life without risk is a pretty superficial life, she thought.

"It's almost time for Compline, Madam Wu. That's just another name for Night Prayer. Do you know why the traditional name for Night Prayer is known as 'Compline?'"

"That is one of the many monastic mysteries that I have not yet solved."

"The word Compline means to complete. Night Prayer completes the rhythm of daily Offices, the celebrations of Psalms and readings that relate to the liturgical or Church seasons such as Advent and Lent. The Liturgy of the Hours, or Divine Office, is generously punctuated with feasts of various kinds in honor of saints or events in the life of Christ. All of this is used to bring us closer to God, not to the worship of saints or even of Jesus' blessed mother. So the Liturgy of the Hours is the backbone of the monastic schedule. I know you understand but sometimes our monastic jargon can be confusing. You almost married someone you let go of so that he could become a monk. Anyway, to make a long story short—which I can't possibly do at this point, Compline simply means to complete the rhythm of common prayer for the day."

The gifted Christian psychic pondered these words for a few moments. Then she said, "Every night at Night Prayer we chant that Canticle of Simeon and Anna. The first line of it says 'Now, God, you can let your servant go in peace.' It makes me reflective, and I begin to wonder if going to sleep for the night is a kind of temporary dying so that we may rise again with Christ in the morning."

The prioress nodded her head as the squeaky rocker that Madam Wu sat in seemed to give its assent also. "Simeon and Anna were two elderly and presumably wonderful people who were dedicated to service in the Jewish Temple. They longed for the coming of the Messiah. When Joseph and Mary presented Jesus in the Temple, in accord with the Jewish custom, he was recognized by them as the Messiah and the canticle you speak of burst forth from Simeon's lips in recognition. He was indeed ready to die because his eyes had seen the Messiah."

As if on cue, the bell in the community room pealed three times. It was indeed time to walk to the oratory to celebrate Compline, after which the great silence would begin, and no one would be permitted to speak until after breakfast the next day.

The prioress hesitated for a moment and then said, "It's been on my mind to share with you something that happened to Brother Francis. There were a few times when he was almost killed. One of them was not long ago. I'd like to tell you that story when we chat again, although I'm not sure why."

## CHAPTER 16 - CHINA

The golden papers crackled in the tired monk's hands. His Chinese trip was tiring him out but when the last of his jetlag was gone he would, as always, be fine. The words on the documents painted pictures in the monk's mind. He always enjoyed the theater of the mind, preferring audio-books to printed books when not studying, and seeking out old-time radio shows on the Internet. Here's what he saw:

Madame de Chantal sat in the Bishop's garden and enjoyed a late fall day. Bishop Francis de Sales joined her there, putting aside his robes used during official ceremonies in favor of a simple cassock. The Baroness was dressed in dark clothing, suitable to a widow. Birds chirped in the trees around them, and water gurgled from a nearby fountain. A gardener worked quietly in the background, each able to give the other the space needed.

"How is that longing within your heart, my dear daughter?"

"My longing to give myself completely to God is stronger than ever, my Lord Bishop. Yet I also know that I have already given myself as completely as possible. My lack of clarity lies in the fact that I believe God wants more from me and I don't know what that is, as you know so well."

"We agree that those religious orders which emphasize bodily penances are not appropriate for you. I believe that your spirit needs to be released and allowed to create whatever follows in that mighty wake. Punishing the body is not the way to free the spirit. I've asked you about joining orders such as these and you always reply in the affirmative because you want very much to do God's will thinking that it may, at least partially, be manifested through me. You are an intelligent and prayerful woman, and you know that God's will comes not only from your spiritual director, me in this case, but from the promptings of your own heart, your gifts, and what others say to you as well. This time I ask you something new. Do you have any interest in living a monastic life that is not totally cloistered so that you might do some work with the poor and sick as an expression of your prayer?"

The widow took in a breath. How could this be? It was everything she longed for and yet the Church made no provision for this blending of the contemplative and apostolic dimensions of the monastic life. There was no such thing as an un-cloistered nun. In her heart, however, she knew that this could come to pass. She began to sing softly, "Now, God, you can let your servant go in peace, for my eyes have seen what I have longed for."

"That canticle from the Scriptures that we say at Compline every night is most appropriate my very dear daughter. You have experienced many losses, spiritual and emotional deaths, already in your life, but I believe that you have many more deaths--and risings--to go yet. I envision a religious community that does not take public vows but rather makes vows of charity and humility to live the Gospel and monastic life in a simple and celibate way while serving others. Even your celebration of the Divine Office could be chanted more simply than some of the older monastic orders. After you prepare for this life by a period of probation, called postulancy, make a novitiate in which you reflect upon the rule of the community, are given a habit and perhaps a new name, and then make your vows, you could go out in pairs for a few hours a few days a week. Your life would still be focused on the contemplative, but the fruit of that would be spent in service for others."

The more the bishop spoke, the more the widow rejoiced. "Earlier, Lord Bishop, I said yes to the suggestions you made out of the higher part of my soul, where my will resides. Now the lower part of my soul, where my feelings reside, is also in harmony with the higher part of

my soul. I suppose what I'm saying is that I am completely at peace with this novel idea. I know that this may mean joys and suffering that I have no idea of as yet, but isn't that the life of faith?"

"Yes it is, my dear one. There are people all over this world, as far away as China, living a life of faith in a variety of traditions, and I respect them all. I have been graced with an understanding of the Gospel and try to live out my life from those values, yet there are many other people, larger in number whose traditions existed long before we came along, who have struggled to live good spiritual and moral lives and continue to do so. Yes, also, this will probably mean joys and suffering for both of us, but I am more than willing to travel this road along with you."

"People will talk; perhaps they already were talking. No matter how one lives people can find fault with it, so it's far better to live by one's inner values than by what others think."

The gardener's tools clanked in the old shed as he slammed the door shut. This visit had ended and something new had begun in the Church and in the world.



*Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and the Salesian profession (vow) cross.*



## CHAPTER 17 - FRANCE

*“My dear Bishop Francis,*

*“My heart is completely serene with the idea of founding a new monastic community which will devote a portion of its time to the sick and the poor and yet remain essentially cloistered. My friends and family, however, are not so at peace. Quite the contrary, I am meeting a great deal of resistance from most people. They think I am foolhardy not to marry as we have already established, but now they are concerned that I may be a bit eccentric even to consider the possibility of the lifestyle you and I envision. There are a few friends who have expressed some interest in our new community and may even be part of an initial foundation. Your thought of a little house near Lake Annecy sounds wonderful.*

*“My children, quite naturally, want me to spend as much time as I can with them. They have experienced many losses in their young lives already--loss of their father, loss of their home, and loss of the freedom and joy they experienced as younger children which, as you know, have all been replaced by the gloom and doom of my father-in-law's cavernous castle.*

*“I hope that my father-in-law will not cause too much trouble as I respond to God's invitation and help to fashion this new community. I would put nothing past him. When we meet again I would like to discuss in more detail the schedule to be followed in the new monastery. I am also curious as to what sort of garb or habit you think ought to be adopted. Shall we chant the entire Divine Office in Latin? Permit me to share my feeling on that matter, if I may. It seems to me that if we are going to spend some time with the sick and poor, it may conflict with spending hours in the choir chanting, not to mention the studies it would take for us to learn the Latin, and then there is the practice time needed for singing it. The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a liturgical prayer form and follows the various phases of the day as does the longer and more complicated Divine Office. Might we consider chanting that in a simple fashion? Simplicity appears to be a key virtue for us.*

*“I am already wearing widow's weeds, as they are called. Perhaps some version of a widow or peasant garment would be appropriate as a habit. Listen to me, going on like this. Your desire to empower me must be taking root. May I always remember that any power we have is from God and to be used for the inner freedom of others.*

*“I meet with more and more resistance each time I leave here to meet with you at the bishop's residence. My heart is filled with courage, however, and I rejoice in this little bit of suffering that I must endure for the sake of responding to God's wonderful invitation. If only others can begin to understand the freedom that following this way of life is already giving me. I have much greater internal freedom just thinking about my new vocation than I have had living here, where there is the necessary food, clothing, and shelter provided. There are many kinds of poverty, and I believe that many people are poor and don't know it. Alternatively, many people who appear to be poor are actually very rich indeed.*

*“With joyful anticipation for our next meeting, I remain your devoted daughter in our Risen Lord,*

*Jane de Chantal”*

## CHAPTER 18 - CHINA

The late fall air felt crisp and delicious as Brother Francis and Theresa drove along a Chinese highway in her minivan. Their destination was what locals call "the country." Mei Li, Theresa's cousin, was expecting them. Brother Francis' heart pounded in his chest as they drew closer and closer to their destination during the two-hour ride. Soon he would be speaking with one of the last people to be in possession of the centuries-old Salesian documents he had been poring over in recent days, one of the last links in a long spiritual chain.

The house was simple--small and a bit crowded for five people--but warm and welcoming. A modest vegetable garden flourished behind the house due to Mei Li's tender care. The dwelling could have used some paint but was otherwise neat and clean. Mei Li heard the car drive in and stood up from her gardening and walked along the side of the house toward the front, wiping her hands on her work apron as she went. Four young children ran out of the front door and embraced Theresa, or at least her knees and ankles, in a tangle of arms and legs.

"Children, where are your manners?" shouted Mei Li with a laugh in her voice. "Please introduce yourselves to our guest." Starting with the oldest child, each one said his or her name and made a small bow before Brother Francis. Brother Francis bowed back with a broad grin on his face.

The monk then walked over to Mei Li and embraced her outstretched hand with both of his. "It is truly a joy to meet you. May I call you Mei Li? It's such a beautiful name and, if I have my Mandarin right, it means 'beautiful.'"

"Please do, Brother Francis. I have a feeling that we have been destined for this meeting for quite some time now," the attractive young woman with long black hair said with genuine warmth.

Brother Francis had a biblical picture come to his mind at that moment. He pictured the Blessed Virgin Mary greeting her aunt Elizabeth. Joy and wonder, mixed with a little fear, crackled between them when both women were pregnant unexpectedly. Mary was to give birth to Jesus, and Elizabeth was to give birth to John the Baptist. The twists and turns of God's plans never ceased to surprise the monk, and this biblical story of the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth was a good example of God's many surprises.

The group made its way into the house. The children went off to play in another room and the three adults settled in around a small table in the living room. Mei Li had all the tea making equipment at her fingertips in this room. She turned on an electric tea kettle. A tea set created out of red clay sat on the table. A round basin about three inches high and eighteen inches in diameter was topped with a flat clay plate with holes in it. The lid had a fluted edge to keep water in and flowing down through the holes when the three small teacups sitting on top would be washed with the boiling water. A small white porcelain bowl containing dried tea leaves sat on the tea set also.

With practiced skill Mei Li began pouring boiling water over each teacup and then onto the tea leaves. When both tea and teacups had been washed in this fashion, she poured fresh boiling water onto the tea leaves and let the tea steep.

"It has only been a matter of months since you lost your husband Mei Li. I am sorry for your loss and grateful for your time," said Brother Francis gently.

"God has given me a great grace, Brother. While I certainly feel emotional pain, it is bearable enough."

Theresa sat in comfortable silence. The people she had bridged together began to discuss

the ancient parchments and their travels through the centuries.

"May I ask how you came to be in possession of the private letters of St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal?"

"I believe that question is exactly what God wants of you, and my response is what God wants of me. I do not read French so I have no clear idea as to the contents of the letters. They were given to my late husband and me by my father-in-law on my wedding day. He said that these were very precious indeed and that God had used his family line to preserve them. The letters were passed on to him by his father on his wedding day. He didn't say this specifically, but I got the impression that the letters were handed on from generation to generation around the time of an oldest child's wedding."

The Salesian monk was mesmerized. "Did your father-in-law tell you anything about the letters?"

"Only that I was to guard them and then pass them on. He said that a time would come when the letters were to be made public. He did not know the day or the hour of that time, however. Even though I don't understand the French language, I am a fairly intuitive person. Something tells me that these letters were correspondence between two deeply spiritual people who, while not married, had a bond between them that God had forged."

"Is there anyone I can speak to who knows more about the transmission of these documents?"

"My father-in-law lives nearby. He is not a very pleasant person and actually wants me to take my children to his house and work for him. I have refused to do this. I value my independence. I will take you over to his house if you like, and perhaps he will tell you something more about the materials you are so interested in."

The more Brother Francis listened, the more Mei Li's life sounded like that of St. Jane de Chantal.





*St. Margaret Mary Alacoque,  
to whom the Sacred Heart of Jesus appeared.*

## CHAPTER 19 – PENNSYLVANIA

Madam Effie Wu and Sister Jane sat companionably in the sun room. Clean up after dinner was complete and community members were recreating by playing cards, listening to music, or taking a walk. Sister Jane was sharing her story about Brother Francis' close call with death, at least one of them, as her inner prompting encouraged her to do.

"It was a late fall day, not too unlike this one. Hunting season begins right after Thanksgiving. Our abbot was out for his daily power-walk and a Pennsylvania state police car stopped him."

"Do you know it's hunting season, Brother?" asked the State Trooper from behind the wheel of his rumbling car.

"I almost forgot, Trooper. I do hear rifle shots echoing now and then."

"Please be careful. I'd encourage you to wear some orange clothing, at least bright colors."

"Thank you, Trooper. I appreciate your concern and your care for all of us with the work that you do," responded the monk.

"My pleasure, Brother. We are grateful for the presence of your little community in our midst." With that the state officer drove off.

"It was only minutes after that when Brother Francis was shot," the nun continued. "An older couple down the road saw him fall to the ground practically in front of their house and came to his aid. They stanching the flow of blood in his side and got him to the hospital. Everyone around here knows us so it was easy for them to identify him at Pocono Medical Center and call us here in the monastery. It seemed like hours before we knew our abbot's medical condition."

Madam Wu had a quizzical look on her face. "It was no accident, was it?"

"We are still not certain. Someone tried to make it look like a hunting accident but it may have been premeditated."

"What individual or group, for that matter, would want to kill Brother Francis? He's spent his life, as I understand it, researching the roots of racial, religious, and social prejudice while trying to eradicate it through his writing and clinical practice."

"Religion has a way of evoking strong feelings. Even when living a simple quiet life such as ours, we are symbols of something much larger and older. There are many who love what we value and symbolize, and there are some who hate it. It was someone from this smaller group who referred to himself as 'an angry Catholic' in a letter we found in our mailbox shortly thereafter. He hid in the woods with his rifle. Brother Francis is a creature of habit and the would-be assassin knew when he would be running by. The man was a good shot but the rustle of a deer in the distance, according to the note, startled the gunman, and his aim was not as perfect as he would have liked."

"Brother Francis almost bled to death, didn't he?"

"Yes, it was touch and go for quite a while. He lost a lot of blood but fortunately the bullet did not hit any vital organs." The nun laughed. "I think the most difficult part of the whole experience for Brother Francis was that he was unable to be as active as he is used to being for several weeks. He replaced his normal daily power-walk with a 'work out' using canned goods in each hand, lifting them up and down and moving them around in a way a little reminiscent of the qigong moves he does in his Chinese wellness practice. While none of us in the community wanted anything like this to happen, we quietly rejoiced that Brother Francis was now forced to

spend extra time in quiet reading, something he enjoys immensely but has little time to do."

The Christian psychic seemed to be absorbing information from another realm. "It was a gunshot, unfortunately a fatal one in this case, that helped give birth to the Salesian family, was it not?"

"I never quite thought of it in that manner, but I suppose you're right, Madam Wu. Our foundress, St. Jane de Chantal, lost her husband to a gunshot. Some things seemed to cycle over and over again in life. The best case scenario is that the good things recycle and we learn from them at a deeper level, and the not-so-good things have their cycle broken by our own hard work and courage."

"Sister Jane, can you tell me anything about the documents being passed on to Brother Francis in China? I must admit that I have a little feeling of fear concerning the transmission of those documents."

"The only thing I know is that they have been handed on from generation to generation and are supposedly directly from the hand of St. Jane de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales. Aside from them being valuable Church documents, they are valuable historical documents as well. I know that people burglarize and steal valuable old paintings, and I suppose the same could happen with valuable old historical documents also."

Madam Wu only nodded silently.

## CHAPTER 20 - FRANCE

Vibrantly colored leaves crackled under their feet as they walked toward a bench in the garden. It was their sanctuary, their place to envision the future, their place to discern what God was inviting them to collaborate on.

"I have found a small dwelling by Lake Annecy. I would like you to take a look at it and see if you think it is appropriate. I know that you are receiving a great deal of resistance because of this project, but that you are also a woman of great courage. Thank you for sharing in this vision with me."

"Thank you, dear Bishop. It is because we are in relationship that the Holy Spirit can operate between us and help us to employ our gifts in this creative way. I will look at the property you mentioned but I am sure that it will be just fine. There are several women who wish to join me in this quest. One of them has suffered a great deal of abuse. I hope that our new monastic community will be a place of healing, not only for those who will live there, but also for the people that the nuns may serve. I know it is unusual, but it would be wonderful if lay women were able to live in the community for small periods of time and make retreat there."

"My very dear daughter, I too envision a place of retreat where women can renew themselves from the cares of the world and then return to it strengthened. Additionally, I agree with you that the Little Office of Our Lady would be the appropriate liturgical prayer for our community. It is part of the public prayer of the Church, the liturgy, but it can be celebrated in a simple fashion and not be burdensome or interfere with the external ministry of the monastery. I have taken the liberty of composing a simple psalm tone of three notes which can be used as a melody for the chanting of the psalms. You asked about what type of habit or garb the nuns are to wear. Have you any suggestions?"

The Baroness took out a piece of black cloth and then placed it over her bonnet. She wondered out loud about how long the veil should be, what would look nicest, and wanted her spiritual director's opinion.

The bishop went into his house and returned a few moments later with a pair of scissors. He proceeded to cut the veil straight across a little below the waistline of the woman wearing it. It was clear that there was to be no hint of worldly vanity in the new community. Long flowing veils were not of importance. Simple garb was.

The Baroness felt a very human twinge of pain but it was only momentary. The ultimate result of the bishop's response was an even greater inner freedom for the Baroness.

"On another note, my Lord Bishop, your letters are a source of great strength for me. I also find increasing clarity of thought by writing back to you. I think it would be helpful for us to keep these letters. They may be of some use to others later on."

"As you wish my daughter."



*Daoist temple in China.*

## CHAPTER 21 - FRANCE

Was a hint of spring in the air--and was more than a hint of ice in the household? Relatives and acquaintances had gathered to see the Baroness off as she entered monastic life. Not only was the thought of her entrance into monasticism looked upon as ludicrous, but founding a small monastery of her own was seen as completely out of the realm of rationality. Jane de Chantal's only consolation was that many of the saints were looked upon in the same way.

One of her relatives told her that she was turning her back on her family. Her eldest son, a mildly wild teenager, stretched himself across the threshold of the doorway at someone's insistence. If she went through with this plan, she was told that she would always be thought of as the woman who stepped over her son's very body to enter monastic life. So it was. When she began to cry while stepping over the young man someone in the crowd ridiculed her. She responded simply with, "I *am* a mother."

The small band of four women made its way to a house called the "Gallery," on the shores of Lake Annecy. Francis de Sales met them there and, within a simple liturgical ceremony, placed a veil on each of their heads--a short black one which stopped shortly below the waist.

The co-founder returned often and gave the novices conferences about the spiritual life and monasticism. He himself was not a monastic, but rather a bishop. He did, however, possess a monastic heart and had spent years studying the fathers and mothers of the desert and their monastic way of living. The Bishop taught them his simple three-note chant and they learned to celebrate the various parts of the Divine Office together.

The little group often met in the monastery garden, surrounded by flowers and embraced by the aroma nature offered them. The Bishop used imagery from nature, such as from the way bees collected honey, and compared it to the soul gathering graces. He spoke on various topics--prudence, humility, the role of the superior, obedience, the holy rule, and much more. Though few in numbers, the little community sank deep roots into the spiritual life. The time was soon coming when they would be permitted to take their first vows.

Jane de Chantal was decorating the chapel for the profession ceremony. She wanted a golden dorsal, a hanging of gold material for the wall behind the altar, to mark this special day in history. The community did not have the money for that. The only money she had was a small emergency fund that the Bishop had provided. She took it upon herself to use that money to buy the dorsal. This did not meet with the Bishop's approval. He did not like it when Jane de Chantal engraved the name of Jesus over her heart, he cut off worldly consideration by giving the community its short simple veil, and now he expressed some disapproval over Jane de Chantal's use of the emergency fund.

These were the three main disagreements between the spiritual couple. Because their communication was typically so harmonious, these events struck a very discordant note--but each learned more about the other through these experiences. They used their differences as a vehicle for growth. Francis de Sales was a born psychologist and Jane de Chantal was a good mother and had been a good wife to the Baron. The humanity of each of the founders became a foundational part of Salesian spirituality, a spirituality that was to span centuries.

## CHAPTER 22 - CHINA

Mei Li asked her next-door neighbor to keep an eye on her children who were playing peacefully. The neighbor dropped everything and said that she would be happy to get the children something to eat and stay there until Mei Li returned. "We won't be long; I'm just taking my cousin and new friend here over to my father-in-law's place."

The neighbor looked at Mei Li quizzically but, in true Asian fashion, reserved her thoughts and feelings behind a neutral face.

Mei Li led her cousin Theresa and Brother Francis through a small stand of knarled trees. Centuries of blowing wind had sculpted them into grotesque yet beautiful forms. The sound of flowing water added to the lush surreal experience. They seemed to have been transported in time. The pensive trio clambered over an ancient but sturdy footbridge, and as they looked up, they could see a short balding man in his sixties standing on his porch regarding them quietly. He emanated an energy that felt cautious.

"Good afternoon my friend," offered Brother Francis in his English-accented Mandarin. "My friend Theresa has been kind enough to take me to her cousin Mei Li who lives next door to you and is your daughter-in-law. I have great interest in learning more about the parchments from Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal which you passed on to your son and Mei Li on their wedding day. I am so sorry for the loss of your son. Would you be willing to speak with me about the parchments?"

The man's persona was stoic. "That depends."

The three relatively newly acquainted friends had made it to the bottom step of the porch by now. "May we come up on your porch and speak with you?"

"That depends."

Brother Francis was usually a pretty peaceful person but he could feel his blood beginning to boil. He had traveled halfway around the world to solve this mystery and wanted to do so. He also found it rather unfriendly to speak, not only to him, but also to the ladies, in such an abrupt fashion. "That depends on what, sir?"

"I will speak to you alone, but not in the presence of the women."

The ladies nodded at Brother Francis and whispered that they would return to Mei Li's home and that he could meet them there. Brother Francis nodded back, believing that the fewer words that were spoken, the better.

When the two men were seated in the humble dwelling on hard wooden chairs, the Asian gentleman said, "What do you want to know?"

"Can you tell me, sir, how the ancient parchments came into your possession?"

"I can, but I'm not sure that I want to. Why are you interested in those musty and moldy old letters? Why they are even written in some European language, French I think."

"I respect all religions, including Buddhism and Daoism, but I myself am a Catholic Christian--actually I am a vowed monk."

The man of the house shrugged his shoulders. "I have little time for religion of any sort. It has done as much harm as it has good. My ancestors came to China along what is known as "the Silk Road," and created the first Christian community in China somewhere around the nine hundreds. The Jesuit order thinks that they brought Christianity to us in the fifteen hundreds through a Jesuit named 'Matthew Ricci' but my ancestors did so long before that."

Mr. Chen, as Brother Francis was instructed to call him, stood up and walked over to a small rickety table and opened a drawer. He took out a piece of dark wood and handed it to

Brother Francis. When the monk looked at the wood he saw that it was carved in the form of a lotus blossom, and rising out of the center of the blossom was a cross about twelve inches high and four inches wide. He put the religious artifact down on the table and it stood upright--the symbol of the Asian culture giving rise to Christian culture. "This is quite beautiful Mr. Chen. I have seen pictures of artifacts like this and have been to the place you mention. There is an old tower there where some of these artifacts have been found by scholars."

The man was becoming increasingly suspicious. "Why are you being so kind? My bearing is usually rather abrasive and I think I'm doing a pretty good job of being that right now. I have a gift, one might say, for driving people away."

"Sometimes we use our gifts in ways that are not life giving. If that energy you have could be directed toward the right tasks, I'll bet you could move mountains."

Mr. Chen was quiet for a moment. "We each have our lineage. My lineage came across the Silk Road and I think yours is more of a spiritual nature--not that I believe much in any of that anymore."

"I'm pretty much a mutt." Brother Francis had to explain the meaning of that word for his host, and then continued speaking. "My *earthly* lineage is Hungarian and Irish and I am blessed with a wonderful family. We've had our share of sickness and death from early on. I believe that this has somehow shaped my life. My *spiritual* family comes from France and stretches back to the fifteen hundreds."

The cautious little man tried not to show it, but he was startled.

"I am a member of the Salesian family. We have men and women dedicated to Christ's mission as lay people, married and single folks, clergy, and vowed monastics. St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal lived the Gospel in a simple and practical way and we are the recipients of their wisdom. The letters you passed on to Mei Li are indeed written in French and date back to our co-founders. As far as I can tell, they have never been seen by any of our Salesian historians. When I read them I am transported back in time and feel as if St. Jane de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales are right there with me. It's a mystical kind of experience."

"Those parchments have always filled me both with awe and guilt--awe because I knew intuitively that they were somehow sacred, and guilt because they seemed to call me to a change of heart--and I was not ready for that."

"Mr. Chen, can you please tell me how they came into your possession?"

"That depends."





*Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, VHM, the original inspiration and co-foundress of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales.*

## CHAPTER 23 - PENNSYLVANIA

Clare couldn't sleep. She had made up her mind to ask to be received as a novice into the Salesian Monastery. Her heart was full of joy, but somehow this little community always brought with it a dose of danger as well. Her intuition was in high gear. Brother Francis was in danger--she was certain of it.

*Maybe I can share my thoughts with Sister Jane, but then again Madam Wu is a Christian psychic. Either or both of them might think me deranged. Raving about the danger our Abbot is in a half a world away and based on no factual evidence is not the way to seek admission into monastic life. Yet one of our vows, which I hope to take one day, is obedience. I've learned that it is not a militaristic response to commands that are barked at you, but rather a constant seeking for the will of God in one's own life. As best I can tell, it is God's will that I share this information with others. After I've done that, I will try to live peacefully with the fallout.*

A psalm at Night Prayer that evening spoke about angels guarding God's people. The closing prayer at the end of Compline every night invited the angels to surround and protect the community members as they slept. Clare thought about these words and asked God to protect her Abbot. Soon she drifted off into a quasi-sleep.

The next day Clare and Brother Matthew walked along the windy road during recreation time. "You seem concerned about something Clare. Is there anything I can do to be helpful?"

"You are the youngest member of the community and it was not that long ago that you took your solemn vows."

"Right you are, as Sister Jane often says, and it was a rocky road getting there," the young monk said with a smile and a sense of triumph.

Clare had to look at Brother Matthew when he was speaking because her primary way of communicating was through lip reading. When a car drove by Brother Matthew couldn't hear Clare, but the cars didn't bother her because she listened with her eyes and with her heart. She explained the struggles of her soul and ended with a question. "Do I speak up about my strange feelings or keep my mouth prudently shut?" Clare was momentarily captivated by the thought that she was seeking admission to a community that was co-founded by the patron of the hearing-impaired, St. Francis de Sales. It was not her main reason for entering but certainly felt like a confirmation of her desire for monastic life.

Brother Matthew was wise beyond his thirty-something years and was also in the process of taking some training in spiritual direction through distance learning and on site in summers at St. Meinrad School of Theology in Indiana. He believed that spiritual direction was one of the most sacred ministries in the Church--one that couldn't be "tamed" by academics or even by canon law. He saw it as a gift of the Holy Spirit that one is given and which can be developed through on the job training and experience and mentoring, or more formally. He longed to do spiritual direction and retreat work as part of his ministry. The young monk was, in fact, beginning to help at some retreat houses and had a limited number of spiritual directees with whom he worked. "I'm pretty certain that the answer to that question lies in your heart. You probably already know what you are going to do but just need a little push."

Clare responded with a small laugh mingled with a tear or two of relief. "One of the most attractive things about community life is that there always seems to be someone around who has what is needed at any given moment."

"One of the most *unattractive* things about community life," the monk said with an outright laugh, "is that there always seems to be somebody around. It's like any kind of life I suppose, the good and the bad, lightness and darkness dance and mingle, and we simply try to navigate our way through."

Clare was thinking out loud now. "Although I think Madam Wu would have a better sense of what I'm talking about, Sister Jane is the prioress and presently my religious superior, and so I think that she would be the most appropriate person to speak with."

"What kind of danger do you think Brother Francis might be in?" Brother Matthew asked gravely.

"I think someone wants to kill him."

## CHAPTER 24 - FRANCE

The small band of women passed their novitiate training in relative peace and eventually professed their private vows of charity and humility. Real humility is truth, according to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, not weakness. One does not draw unnecessary attention to oneself, but does not hide what God does in his or her life either. It was this very St. Bernard who was a family ancestor to Jane de Chantal. One incident during their year of novitiate was a little humbling and unsettling. Shortly after the small community of women moved to the Gallery house someone hung a sign on their door which simply referred to the place as "The Bishop's Harem." The first group of nuns, now called the order of the Visitation of holy Mary, defended their good names once, and then lived peacefully with the results as the *Introduction to a Devout Life* would encourage them to do.

Other monasteries of the Visitation began springing up throughout Europe. Francis de Sales was bishop of his diocese and had the jurisdiction to permit monastics to leave their cloister to minister to the sick and poor, but other bishops did not seem to grasp this revolutionary concept of monastic life. As the order spread, the external trappings of monasticism were imposed in a more stringent fashion by Rome. The Visitation order was now cloistered. The founders and early members acquiesced to the will of God as found in the traditions that were imposed upon them. The time would come when there would be two expressions of the Visitation life--one totally enclosed, and the other with some external ministry such as retreat work, helping the sick and poor, or even a school.

The contemplative life that Jane de Chantal longed for had to be primarily an interior experience because she often found herself being carted about in a carriage, or traveling on horseback from monastery to monastery. She spoke with novices and superiors, as well as civil authorities and neighbors of the new communities. She prayed the psalms as she bumped along the roads and her faith grew over the years by doing the duties of her state in life. It was a faith that developed in darkness rather than in light. Her prayer was primarily one of dryness and struggle. Religious wars and other conflicts saddened her, but she took courage in a God she knew who calls us all to holiness through very ordinary events.

Most of the people whom she loved had died before her, and yet she continued on. Her last meeting with her beloved Francis de Sales was bittersweet. She had notes about her spiritual life that she wanted to share with the Bishop but she also had a stack of papers relating to the business of the monasteries. She asked him which material they might go over first. The Bishop stated that it might be best to deal with the affairs of the monasteries first. When that was completed he had to go away on business before they got to discuss Jane de Chantal's prayer experiences. While he was away, the former baroness and present mother foundress had a premonition--that her beloved spiritual friend was dead. It was not long before a messenger came to the door with exactly that news.

Jane de Chantal continued her work, and even gave testimony about the spiritual life of Bishop Francis de Sales when he was being investigated for possible canonization as a Saint. One day, while back from her travels and sitting quietly in her room, the mother foundress had another premonition. Someone was coming to visit her and he would take their charism to another land--a land she would never live to see.



*Father Louis Brisson, OSFS,  
co-founder of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales.*

## CHAPTER 25 - FRANCE

The years passed quickly for Mother de Chantal. They were a blend of darkness and light, as is life for most people. She spent much of her time visiting monasteries of the order and praying during the journey, rather than in the quiet of one of the monastery chapels that she had founded in conjunction with her spiritual friend, Francis de Sales.

The mother foundress was back at Annecy for a period of quiet renewal, a very rare treat indeed. Recreation with the community included spinning yarn and doing mending as they chatted. Sometimes they would sing together or tell stories, often based on the lives of the saints. One evening after Night Prayer, Mother de Chantal was about to go to her cell, as simple monastic sleeping rooms are sometimes called, to retire for the evening. Most unusual for that hour, the Sister charged with interfacing between the monastic enclosure and "the world" came to her. The out-sister said there was a gentleman here to see her. Mother de Chantal was confused but not completely surprised. It was dusk so she was not expecting anyone. Because her life had been filled with surprises, one possibility was that perhaps it was the relative of a nun, or a workman who had been hired to help in the renovation of a building being turned into a new monastery.

Even though monastics do not normally speak from Night Prayer until after breakfast, a period called the "grand silence," the foundress consented to see the visitor. Her Salesian spirituality was nothing if it was not practical and charitable. She knew it would be unkind to turn the man away because he had probably traveled from a great distance. The out-sister accompanied her Rev. Mother to the visiting parlor and sat discreetly in a corner on a wooden chair. Mother de Chantal drew back the black drapes in front of her which revealed a crisscross of metal bars called "the grill." This grill marked the enclosure between the outer world and the inner world of the monastery. It was also a form of protection for a group of women living in the middle of the forest, or anywhere else for that matter. The drapes were often closed and a visitor would speak with the cloistered nun through the black cloth. Mother de Chantal wanted to be as welcoming as possible so she chose the option of opening the drapes.

A man of medium height stood before her. His black hair was wet with rain and his complexion glistened in the light of the oil lamp on the nun's side of the grill. The gentle man placed his two palms together in front of his heart and bowed to the foundress. "Rev. Mother, thank you for seeing me. Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Henri. Some years ago I was very sick and poverty-stricken. Your nuns were just founded and I was one of the people you cared for in the very beginning. You and another nun came to visit me, bathe my wounds, and cook for me. I have never forgotten that. I have also never forgotten the prayers that you promised to say for me. I know that a major portion of your day is given over to prayer and that your general intention is to pray for the needs of all people, especially those you have cared for in your external ministry." The man's voice was starting to quiver with emotion.

"We did no more than our vocation calls us to do. Yet I am very happy to receive your information. Many times we don't know what happens to the people we care for. Sometimes they get better, sometimes they die, and sometimes they move in with relatives. We do what we can. As for the prayer, we do hold all of you in our hearts, whether our failing memories remember exactly what transpired or not. Can you tell me why you have come here this evening?"

"Please forgive the fact that I have arrived unannounced and at a late hour. I was traveling on horseback and my horse went lame. I wound up walking, and bringing the horse along with his reins in my hand. I have bandaged his ankle and I think he will be fine, but I did

not want to turn back. Rev. Mother, I have often listened to your co-founder, Bishop Francis de Sales, when he would speak publicly. You might say that I have imbibed the spirit of the Visitation order and the Salesian charism from your ministry and his preaching. After lengthy discussions with my own spiritual director I am going to become a hermit. This is indeed an unusual vocation but I believe that God is calling me to it. I wanted you to know this because Francis de Sales is dead and I may never see you again, except in Paradise."

"This is indeed unique and your story quite interesting. As I'm sure you know, a hermit is one who leaves the world only to enter into it at a deeper level. If one is running away from life, becoming a hermit is a very unhealthy thing to do. I will trust my instincts and your spiritual director on this matter, and believe that you are doing what the Holy Spirit has called you to do. It seems to me that you are going *toward* something, or someone, rather than running away."

Henri smiled humbly. "Mother, may I ask a favor of you? I would like to have some writings from you and Bishop Francis de Sales to take with me. I would like to use that material for spiritual reading so that I might deepen my understanding of the Scriptures and of the spiritual life through the writings you may be able to provide for me. I believe that I have been guided here to receive whatever material you wish to entrust to me. I cannot say that I will be able to return it to you directly, but will certainly do my very best to see that it returns to the Salesian family one day."

Mother de Chantal shuddered. She had a blinding insight that this newly-called hermit would live in a hermitage very far away indeed. The Salesian charism would be passed on to a wider audience in that way.

## CHAPTER 26 - CHINA

The Abbot did not like to play mind games, although many people stereotyped clinical psychologists as people who did. His Salesian charism called him to be simple, gentle, and not unnecessarily invasive. "Mr. Chang, either you tell me where you received the parchments freely, or I will thank you for your hospitality and make my way back to my friend's house."

"You are indeed an unusual person, Brother Francis. Most people would raise their voices or storm out of here. You have done neither, although I can see that you are trying to control yourself. Thus, I see you as human and spiritual at the same time. You are teaching me a lot through your deportment. It's time that my deportment became better, not only toward you but toward people in general. I have been a man filled with hate and bitterness, but my encounter with you is somehow inviting me to change. Hatred does not really accomplish anything; I knew that but couldn't admit it. You helped me do this without any direct preaching, which I truly admire.

"As for the parchments, they have been handed down in our family for four centuries now. A verbal story has been handed down with them also, and you know how that can go. Much like the present printed Bible, stories change over time and may be accurate, inaccurate, or a blend of both."

Brother Francis' attention was riveted on the words of this enigmatic person. "Please tell me the story."

"Certainly, Brother. I was told that a hermit from the West lived out here in the country. He was a Christian hermit, which was quite unusual for this part of the world. The hermit followed Christ but his spirituality, if that's the proper term for it, was influenced by two people, a woman and a man."

"Who were they?"

"They were from France as I understand it; one was a widow and the other was a bishop. As we previously discussed, in the East we venerate our lineage, be it spiritual or genetic. These two people spawned a lineage of the spirit that I believe you have been living for many years. Their names were Mother Jane de Chantal and Bishop Francis de Sales."





*Mother Frances de Sales Aviat, OSFS, (St. Leonie),  
First Oblate Sister.*

## CHAPTER 27 - PENNSYLVANIA

The postulant to monastic life was flustered, and this was rare for her. "I know it sounds ridiculous Brother Matthew, but that's what is on my heart and I thought I would share it with you before I went to the top, so to speak." Her composure was quickly returning and her joke about "the top" evidenced this.

"Sure, no problem. I understand. Do you have any more clarity than that on the danger Abbot Francis may be in?"

"I feel it has something to do with the Salesian parchments he is reading. It's almost as if that process is reactivating an old pattern. Our holy mother, St. Jane de Chantal, lost her husband in a shooting. Brother Francis was nearly killed in a shooting just about a year ago around Thanksgiving time. Our Abbot is half a world away and I think someone is after him there. Why the sacred letters of two spiritual friends would provoke such dangers is beyond me, but I suppose others have killed for less."

The young monk pondered this briefly. He initially thought that Clare might do well to talk to Sister Scholastica, who had been a CIA agent prior to becoming a nun. That in itself was unusual, but perhaps not so for their wonderful little monastery. Then he thought better of Clare talking with this woman. Sister Scholastica was cerebral, a kind of nuts and bolts person. "Why not simply share what's on your mind with our prioress, Sister Jane? I think Madam Wu would be an excellent resource as well, but we might do well to let Sister Jane make that call."

The prioress rocked in the creaky wooden rocker in the sun room. "How can I help you, dear? I've noticed that you seem a bit pensive these days. Community is here to help support you in both the joys and burdens of your life. If I can't be of help I'll find someone who can."

"I'm apprehensive about Brother Francis while on his present trip to China. When I pray I get a feeling that he is in danger. Perhaps I simply miss him, or it may just be my imagination, but I am relieved to be able to tell you about this." Clare seemed to melt back into the old orange wingback chair after she had spoken.

The prioress was a rather unflappable woman and she maintained her equanimity even now. "You know what, Madam Wu has been talking about having similar feelings. I don't have the kind of intuition the two of you appear to possess. May I see if I can round her up and have her join in on our conversation?"

The room was filled with sun but a cloud wandered through the sky and brought a momentary darkness. "I would like that very much, Sister."

It was Sunday afternoon, a day of rest, and Madam Wu had been napping. Though unusually neat even at home, her blond hair was now a bit askew, but her smile was as radiant as ever. "I'll sit on this wooden framed chair with aqua vinyl covering on the seat. It's a delight to see how you recycle everything, and hang onto old material things rather than discarding them simply because they are out of style. I must admit that I sometimes smile when I see how mismatched things are around here. The people, however, are all a wonderful match. Each person has his or her own unique personality and gifts, yet they somehow create a living mosaic."

Effie Wu looked directly at the postulant. "I do share your concerns, Clare. I think it has something to do with the four hundred year old Salesian parchments that Brother Francis is dealing with over there. It's as if they are a magnet attracting both danger and opportunity. As an aside, I understand that the Chinese characters for danger and opportunity, when used together, mean 'crisis.' Let's hope that the opportunity aspect of that word dominates in this case. Chinese

writing looks like so much chicken scratch to me, yet I admire the brains and hands that can write that way."

Clare began to smile just as Effie Wu had intended, and then she said, "That's exactly my sense too, Madam Wu--I mean the part about the parchments attracting both opportunity and danger."

The prioress momentarily reflected on what she was hearing. "What do we do next, girls?"

## CHAPTER 28 - FRANCE

When Francis de Sales was a student in Paris he almost died. Scholars were busy discussing the theological concept of predestination in those days. Was one born with an automatic ticket to go to heaven or hell at the end of one's life? Was there anything we could do about changing that? Were all, indeed, destined for a life with God? Francis de Sales was not afraid of hell so much as he was sick at heart from the fear that he might not be able to spend eternity with the God whom he had grown to love so much.

The young student was anorexic and feverish, and had been so for several weeks. Much more of this and he would die. He wandered into a church and knelt before a statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance, also known as the Black Madonna. Some say the latter name came from the years of incense and candle flames that darkened her on the outside. Others focus on the fact that such statues were originally crafted from dark wood to draw one more deeply into the image and the deep realities she expressed. In front of the statue, pasted on a board, was a prayer to the Blessed Virgin written by Jane de Chantal's ancestor, St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The prayer was called the *Memorare*. He read the prayer and surrendered everything to God through Mary's intercession. He experienced a blinding Zen-like insight which told him that he didn't know about the future and that he had enough to do in living well right now. His anxiety and confusion lifted immediately. Francis de Sales devoted himself to living in the present moment from that time on and taught his spiritual family to do the same.

"Mother de Chantal, are you all right?"

The out-sister in the corner began to rise. "Oh Henri, I'm so sorry. I guess I was thinking about the past. So much has happened in my life. Some things have been very difficult, but I have much to be grateful for. I'm thinking about your request. How would this be? Spend the night in our guesthouse and, if you wish, join us before dawn for Matins, the vigil service from our Divine Office which is said in the darkness before dawn. After that the nuns meditate for about an hour and then pray Lauds, Morning Prayer. We will have some breakfast sent here to the parlor for you and then I will join you and we can talk about some spiritual reading material which may meet your needs."

Although the material was not yet in his hands, Henri knew what it would be.

The nuns chanted in the simple three-toned psalmody that their holy founder, Bishop Francis de Sales, had created for them. Henri sat in the secular chapel, semi-separated from the choir stalls of the nuns by a grill, and joined them in spirit. He had been to several Visitation convents and everyone celebrated the Divine Office in this same way. It was beautiful, but he could never reach the high-soaring notes that the nuns seemed so comfortable with. As a hermit he would be celebrating the Divine Office alone and that suited him just fine. He meditated quietly for an hour after Matins, something he very much enjoyed doing. The chanting started again. Dawn was breaking and his heart was longing to set off for China and his new life as a Christian hermit.

A wooden contraption about three feet high and built into the wall of the parlor began to rumble. It was a half barrel, sliced from top to bottom. It turned around and there were shelves in it. His breakfast was on a tray on one of the shelves. He enjoyed the strong hot coffee and the dark homemade bread. There was even a poached egg for him to eat! He smiled to himself and hoped that he would be mortified enough to accept whatever God provided, whether he liked it or not, as a hermit. He tried to do this in all things and found it sage advice from the founders of the Salesian spiritual family.

Henri stood up as the foundress entered the visiting parlor. He smiled inwardly and externally as he noticed the leather case she held reverently in her arms. When removed from their protective container, the parchments inside were seen to be two stacks, each neatly tied together with purple ribbons. Each stack was about three inches high. One stack was the letters of the mother of foundress and the other the letters of her co-founder.

"After we spoke last evening I took the liberty of sending a messenger out to review your background, so to speak. My intuition said that everything you spoke about was the truth but, as an administrator, a job I dislike, I thought it prudent to get whatever I could confirmed. The messenger is a man who helps maintain our property here and he spent the night riding to your parish church, to another Visitation monastery, and to the little cell of your spiritual director. One person gave him information that led him to the next, and so forth. By the time Lauds was over this morning he had reported to me the results of his labors. You are indeed the genuine article that I thought you were, and I hope that you will not be offended that I investigated you in this fashion. I'm used to doing it with potential novices to our monasteries, and since you are moving into a Salesian hermit's vocation I thought it only fitting that you go through a similar process."

"Thank you for doing that Rev. Mother. It somehow confirms my vocation. As I mentioned, it is definitely a *Salesian* hermit that I want to be."

The foundress smiled broadly. "I think I may be able to help you with that in several ways. She patted the old satchel lovingly. The letters written on these parchments have been shared with no one but Francis de Sales and me. I am getting older and something needs to be done with them. They are sacred to me but filled with ordinary human foibles and mistakes, both of grammar and behavior. A hermit's vocation is very sacred and so I entrust them to you, a soon to be newly-consecrated hermit. They will return to the wider Salesian family when the time is right. In the meanwhile you can ponder them and pass them on as you see fit. I will trust your prudence and judgment in that matter."

Mother de Chantal slowly walked to the half-barrel contraption at the far end of the grill which she referred to as "the turn," and put the parchments on the middle shelf. She gave the barrel a little turn. Henri reverently picked up the satchel of parchments and put them in a broadcloth bag he brought with him for their transportation and protection.

"The second way I may be able to help you is by receiving your hermit's vows. Why wait until you get to China to find someone to witness your vows? When someone is as committed as you are, the vows have already been made in spirit in your heart. I often encourage novices to make their vows in private before their profession ceremony, so that they will be able to say them with devotion and without nervousness and self-consciousness which can happen in the presence of other people at the ceremony itself.

"I invite you to spend a few more days in our guesthouse and after that, at Vespers one evening, I can receive your hermit's vows and place around your neck our Salesian profession cross."

"I've seen it on your nuns, Mother. It's a simple silver cross with some engravings and no corpus on it. Can you tell me more about it?"

"Myself and Bishop Francis de Sales wore this cross as a sign of our commitment to our way of life. When a member of the Salesian family makes her, and now his, vows, they are given this cross much the same way someone is given a wedding ring. There is no corpus on the cross because the one who is given the cross is supposed to be united with Christ on it. A mountain is engraved at the bottom of the cross, out of which springs an olive leaf, my favorite combination of symbols. This represents the peace that comes from Mount Calvary, which I know, can sound

like an oxymoron. It represents the peace that one can experience in the midst of life's struggles when one is focused on doing God's will. Inside the cross are a few relics and the beginning verses of the Gospel of St. John written on a tiny piece of paper."

"You are the foundress, my spiritual mother, but I have a little prophecy to share. The day will come when the Salesian family will incorporate people from every walk of life--lay members who are both men and women, religious communities of vowed women and men in service to others, and monastic women and men."

Mother de Chantal simply smiled.



*Stream between Mei Li's home and her father-in-law's property, with turtles sunbathing on a rock at bottom of picture.*

## CHAPTER 29 - CHINA

The languid stream seemed to gurgle a little louder as Brother Francis made his way back to Mei Li's home. The beauty of the surroundings called to him and he stopped after he crossed over the rickety old foot bridge to do a little of his Chinese medical practice known as "qigong" by the edge of the water. He was moving his outstretched arms up toward the heavens palms up, and then turning his palms down toward the earth on the downward motion as he prayed a prayer that went along with his favorite movement called "Connecting Heaven and Earth." As he raised his arms to the sky once again his palms turned up toward the fleecy white clouds above him—and a gunshot crackled through the air. Brother Francis crumpled and fell, bleeding profusely, to the mossy ground.

Theresa and Mei Li looked at one another over the wooden table and said nothing. Their worst fears had possibly come true. They told the children that it was probably just a hunter and hurried out the door to check on things. Everyone was keenly aware that it was a hunter who had killed the beloved father and spouse of this household not many months before. They ran toward Mei Li's father-in-law's home. Within minutes they saw the Salesian monk lying in a pool of blood, and blood was still spurting. He weakly raised a hand to motion them close to him, barely able to speak. "In my backpack you'll find a brown bottle containing Yun Nan Bai Yao powder. Please get it and sprinkle the entire bottle on my wound. Then take a clean cloth and press it over the wound and please take me to a surgeon so that the bullet may be removed properly."

Mei Li ran back to the house to get the ancient Chinese medicine which was a hemostatic, something that would stop the profuse bleeding. Theresa held the dying monk's hand and prayed for healing while pressing her other hand against his wound to staunch the blood flow. Brother Francis whispered to her, "If it is my time to go to God, I embrace it; if not, I embrace that also. Please pray that God's holy will be done because we can never go wrong in doing God's will."

"Brother Francis, I believe it is always God's will that we be whole and healthy, if not in this life than in the next."

The monk appeared to be growing paler by the second, but he simply smiled.

Mei Li returned with a little brown bottle in one hand and several white towels in her other hand. Francis had on casual clothing, not his monastic habit. Mei Li materialized a pair of scissors and cut the monk doctor's blue shirt near his heart. She sopped up blood with one of the towels and then sprinkled the mildly bitter powder directly onto the neat round wound, all the while hoping that the bullet would not mean this man's death. She then took a smaller towel and folded it in quarters and applied it to the wound, taping it on.

"You would make a good doctor, Mei Li," the monk whispered with an effort.

"It's the result of raising children alone, Brother."

Mei Li's father-in-law appeared out of nowhere. "What has happened to that good man?"

Brother Francis was now just about unconscious, but the two women looked up at the little man who had been visiting with Brother Francis shortly before. It was difficult for them not to think uncharitable thoughts or harbor suspicions.

"We have got to get him to the hospital, father-in-law; can you help us?" Mei Li asked with thinly controlled fury.

"All I have is my old truck so it will be a bumpy ride, but I will gladly take Brother Francis to the hospital. Unfortunately the hospital is not very close and I'm not certain our friend will survive the trip. Wouldn't it be better to take him to our local Chinese medicine doctor?"

The women struggled to make a decision. Time was clearly of the essence. The old



Chinese doctor had the wisdom of the ages but he was not a Western trained doctor. "Brother Francis' life is led by the Spirit and his ministry has Chinese medicine at the heart of it. Perhaps we need to follow our spiritual promptings on this matter and go to the Chinese medicine doctor," Theresa said, thinking out loud.

The two women were decisive. "Please drive your truck over here, father-in-law, and I will get a few blankets to make Brother Francis as comfortable as possible."

Within minutes Mei Li's children were being attended to by her neighbor and a quartet rattled down the muddy road in search of desperately needed help.

## CHAPTER 30 - PENNSYLVANIA

The jangle of a telephone in the middle of the night was never a good sign. The prioress picked up the receiver and groggily croaked into it, "Salesian Monastery." It was the middle of the night in Pennsylvania, but the middle of the next afternoon in China. Mei Li's neighbor had a cell phone and called a relative who had a phone capable of connecting with the United States. After a few attempts at calling which did not get through, the relative asked for the assistance of a telephone operator who made the call happen almost magically. The connection was, surprisingly, crystal-clear. All that this third-hand person's account could convey to the prioress was that, "A Brother Francis has been shot and is being attended to. There will be more information forthcoming as soon as they have any."

"No, he is not in a hospital. He is with a local doctor who doesn't have a telephone. I will do my best to be a good go-between for all of you. I know you are Christians. I am a Buddhist and have great devotion to the Medicine Buddha. I will chant the mantra of the Medicine Buddha for the health of your spiritual brother."

Sister Jane shakily thanked the caller and scribbled down the number she was given, which included a country code, and hung up. She would never get back to sleep now. She put on her robe and was making her way to Madam Wu's room to debrief when she realized that the community room was filled with the community. Some people had on sweat clothes and some had on habits, so she joined them there. Each person looked at the nun expectedly.

"Please sit down everyone I have some sad news to share with you. I don't know how else to say it so I'll just come right out with it. Our abbot has been shot. I have no details as to why but I understand that he is in critical condition. He is not being treated at a major hospital, nor at any hospital. He is in the office of a Chinese medicine doctor as we speak."

"It's just as I thought," whispered Clare, more to herself than to the community. Madam Wu nodded sadly.

Sister Scholastica busied herself boiling water for tea and setting out some cookies and napkins on the wooden refectory table. Everyone wandered to the table as if Sister Scholastica had somehow communicated her wish to them telepathically. Everyone sat down on his or her wooden bench and then distracted themselves by choosing from a multitude of variously flavored teabags. They normally brewed tea from loose leaves but teabags were sometimes handier and tonight everyone could use "handy."

The doorbell rang and the group jumped in unison. A small window in the kitchen area allowed people to look out into the foyer and see who was there. Brother Matthew recognized Doctor Chantal Fleur and David Gold instantly. It was indeed a welcome sight.

"What are you people doing up in the middle of the night?" forensic and clinical psychologist Chantal Fleur asked with an air of authority. Detective David Gold nodded his head in assent.

Everyone began to talk once. "Please, please my sisters and brothers; let us speak one at a time. Just for the sake of organization I'll get us started. We might ask you two the same question. What are you doing here at this hour?"

"We were on our way back from Philadelphia. We went to a concert. It's not David's favorite thing but he's a good husband and he went with me. We stopped for some coffee on the drive back and something told us to drive by the monastery, maybe stop in the oratory for a little prayer even though you know I'm a hopeful agnostic and our dear David has been graced with the faith of a devout Jewish man. Now please tell us what's going on."

The prioress shared with the dear friends of the community as much as she knew, which was very little. Chantal and David, who had helped to solve a few mysteries with Brother Francis and his community over the years, looked at one another.

"We've got to catch a plane," David said, as he and Chantal said good night, closing the door behind them as they left.



*Logo of the Salesian Monastic Community (Pennsylvania)  
containing a detail from the Salesian profession cross—  
an olive branch rising out of Mount Calvary.*

## CHAPTER 31 - FRANCE

The heart of the hermit was bursting with gratitude. Not only was he able to consecrate himself to God as a hermit in the Salesian family, he was able to pronounce his vows in the presence of one of the founders, and in a Visitation monastery chapel. After the nuns had chanted the psalms for Evening Prayer, one of the Sisters read a reading from the Bible about giving up everything for the sake of the Gospel and then Henri pronounced his vows, kneeling at the feet of the foundress.

It was a rare day when the entire community could go to the visiting parlor and celebrate, albeit through a grill, with a visitor. Today was one of those days. Coffee and cake were served, and stories were shared of new ideas and the power of the Holy Spirit. Brother Henri shared with his new Sisters that he was on his way to China. He believed that it was crucial for men and women of *every* faith to recognize and respect one another's differences, and share whatever it was they held in common. He would do this with his very life. He had no idea what he would find when he got there. Brother Henri had little money and was literally leaving everything behind, just as the Gospel reading a half-hour before had invited him to do.

"Callings from God are curious things indeed. I remember the difficulty I had in trying to help people understand the new vision of monastic life that Bishop Francis de Sales and I had for the Visitation. Some people simply humored us, others discouraged us, and some actively worked against what we were doing. In the end, of course, God's will was accomplished. Your vocation, Brother Henri, is indeed a unique one. It is also one that has been with humankind from the beginning of the Church and even before then. Please know that your Salesian family is always with you and will keep you in our thoughts and prayers now." The foundress radiated a beatific energy and then smiled, "and through the ages."

Before Brother Henri left for Asia, Mother de Chantal told him that Bishop Francis de Sales eventually asked her not to call him "Lord Bishop" any longer because, he said, "We are one heart, one soul." (Perhaps the saintly bishop had a premonition of the revelations of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that one of their own Visitation nuns, St. Margaret Mary, would one day experience. This image of the heart of Christ would ultimately invite people to relate to the humanity of God as well as to the divinity of God.) The foundress continued her Salesian lesson, "I encourage you, my brother in the Lord, to use your heart to relate to all people as your sisters and brothers, and thus live out the title 'Brother' which you now bear."

There is no record of how Brother Henri made his way to China. Stories passed down by word-of-mouth in various Visitation monasteries suggest that he lived in a simple hut in the woods and spent his days praying and growing various Chinese medicinal herbs, then taking the herbs to market. He would treat the occasional person who came by, but his life was primarily cloistered. The parchments from the mother foundress were food for his soul and helped him to understand the Scriptures and the eremitical life more profoundly. He mourned the loss of a collection of letters by Mother de Chantal that Francis de Sales had saved. The foundress had told him that she threw them in the fire when the Bishop died so that no one would see those annotated notes about her soul.

A Chinese family was captivated by the unique lifestyle of this Western hermit. They were familiar with Daoist monks and Buddhist monks but a Western Christian monk was a novelty. Brother Henri was a likable person and he became like one of the family to these kind Chinese people. The years passed and the hermit knew his time on earth was coming to a close.

He felt he had lived up to what God had invited him to and, as he lay dying, he asked a favor of the family who had been kind to him by allowing him to live in a hut on their property.

"There are some parchments I would like you to take care of for me." Brother Henri's Mandarin was like that of a small child--but then so was his heart. "Someday they need to be returned to my spiritual family, but for now if you just see that they are protected, and please pass them on to upcoming generations. I believe that they will eventually go to the person they are intended to reach."

The mother and father of the household nodded and smiled. They bowed to the dying hermit and received the leather satchel containing two stacks of parchments tied together with faded purple ribbons. They could make no sense of the writing and didn't understand why these writings were precious. They were precious to Brother Henri and that was enough for them.

The old hermit died and was buried near his little hermitage. Practically no one even knew he lived there but he had the peace that comes from knowing he had followed the will of God as best he understood. Not only that, the hermit was grateful for a rich and fulfilling life when he died.

## CHAPTER 32 - FRANCE

Mother de Chantal founded Visitation monasteries throughout Europe and eventually, through death, had time for abundant prayer in the presence of the God she longed to see in life. Most of her prayer on earth was filled with darkness and struggle. It was more than enough for her to know, however, that she was doing God's will as best she understood it.

As the centuries passed, the religious superior of a French Visitation monastery founded an order of Sisters and, about two years later, a related community of priests and Religious Brothers who lived by the spirit of the Visitation and the Salesian charism. These dedicated women and men were destined to become social service workers, educators, missionaries, clergy, and pastoral ministers of every sort.

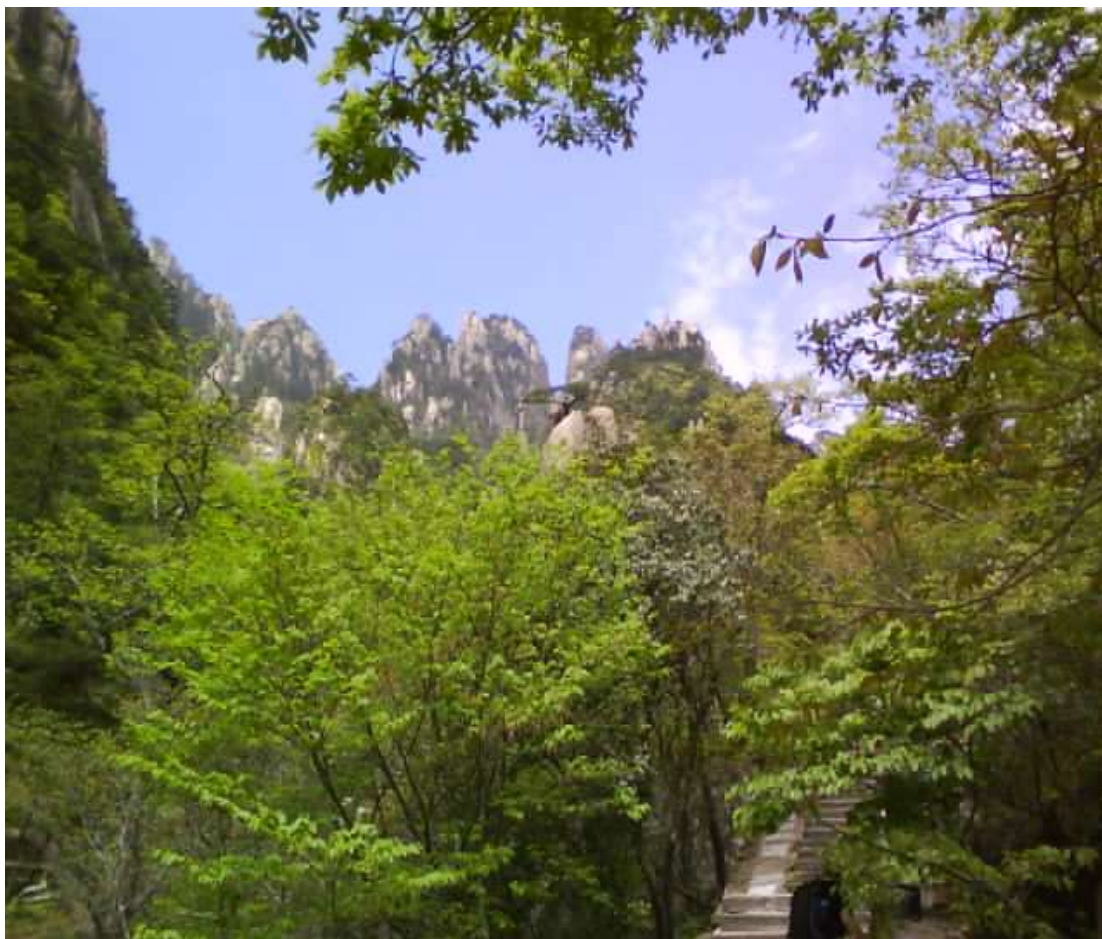
Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, VHM, encouraged the monastery's chaplain, Father Louis Brisson, to found the Oblates of St Francis de Sales. Leonie Aviat, later to become Mother Aviat, and eventually St. Leonie, was the first Oblate Sister.

The men's branch of the Oblates taught Brother Francis in high school. He entered the community at seventeen years of age after graduating high school, and stayed with them for almost thirty years of happy, fruitful life and ministry. His desire to become a monk in the Salesian tradition was fulfilled after Vatican Council II made changes in canon law which allowed him to pursue life as a solitary monk within the small community of members that eventually sprung up around him. It is interesting to note that Pope John XXIII, who convened this council of Church renewal, was devoted to the teachings of St. Francis de Sales as found in his *Introduction to a Devout Life*.

Brother Francis' superior general gave him permission to live this way and he was welcomed by a local bishop in Pennsylvania. It was a unique vocation, not always understood by everyone, but then most unique things are by their very nature that way.

Mother de Chantal's influence had spread to America--directly through the founding of numerous Visitation monasteries--and indirectly through the foundation of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, who became numerous in the United States and Europe.

Brother Francis celebrated the fact that his lineage went back to the time of Christ and the early Church. Within that lineage he also treasured his incorporation into the Salesian family, which dated back to the fifteen hundreds. Another aspect of his lineage involved Chinese medicine, which went back in time for about five thousand years. The monk was indeed a man in the modern world, in touch with its challenges, and yet there was something ancient in his heart. His Asian sisters and brothers believed in reincarnation. Brother Francis believed that he would live forever after death, not in an earthly way, but in a spiritual way. We were all destined to meet again.



*Chinese countryside, with a stone footpath to ease the journey.*



## CHAPTER 33 - CHINA

The home of the humble Chinese doctor was neat and clean. Not exactly the Mayo Clinic, it contained a room about twenty feet square with two walls lined with shelves of various and sundry medicinal herbs and two walls containing shelving with old books on them. A simple wooden pallet with a thin white mat covering it stood to the left as one entered the clinic area. The space to the right of the door was graced with an old wooden desk buried in papers. Straight ahead, in front of the entrance, was a doorway with a curtain wherein the doctor lived.

The trio carried the dying monk into the healer's dwelling. The doctor quickly spread a clean sheet over the treatment table and asked them to lay the patient on it face up. A few well-worn chairs stood in front of the windows on the side of the clinic where the doctor's desk was.

"Please for you to go over there and sit down quietly," the doctor said with such quiet authority that all three simply obeyed--and even felt a sense of calm settle upon them. The doctor cut away the remains of the shirt the patient wore. He muttered to himself. The three native Chinese people understood that his words were part prayer and part thinking aloud.

The healer was about the same age, middle sixties, as was his patient. Even though one countenance was Western in appearance and the other Eastern looking, there was a deeper energy that was held in common between the two doctors. They had spent their lives working toward the healing of others and it radiated out from them. The Chinese doctor poked and prodded gently around the wound after he removed the bandage. The blood was not flowing as profusely but he still had to work quickly before it started up again. He took a long slender knife out of a container of alcohol and, before anyone could blink, he had the bullet removed from the wound.

He packed the wound with the same Chinese herbal medicine that Brother Francis had directed the women to use on his wound, Yun Nan Bai Yao, and taped a clean piece of gauze over the wound. The doctor placed his first three fingers on the right wrist of the patient and pressed them up and down individually, as if he were playing a trumpet. He then performed the same movements on the monk's left wrist.

"Please to come over here. What is this man's name?"

"Theresa responded for the trio, "He is a Christian monk and his name is Brother Francis."

"Brother Francis has too much heat. If he experiences much more heat he may die. We must cool that heat and prevent infection. Please get the pillow that is under this treatment table and very gently prop the patient up enough so that he can drink a little water."

The doctor mixed up a dry concoction of dandelion and lotus root which the Chinese call "Chuan Xin Lian." He threw the herbs in hot water and let them steep. While the Chinese medicinal formula was brewing he told his guests that he was not sure if Brother Francis would live or die. He had lost a lot of blood and the wound was now infected. The Chinese healer poured the pot with the water in it through a strainer and thus created a teapot full of medicine. He took his thumb and pressed on the upper lip of the monk and then upward toward the monk's nose to awaken the semi-conscious patient. Brother Francis' entire body lurched in response--and then he briefly opened his hazel eyes.

"Drink this, Brother Francis, it will help to lower your inflammation, clear your excessive heat, and help you feel better."

"Mei Li's father-in-law spoke up, "What do we do now?"

"We wait, and if you wish, you can pray."

## CHAPTER 34 - CHINA

Chantal and David spent several days flying and then doing the detective work necessary to find Brother Francis. Through the kindness of several Chinese people they made it to the doctor's office where their beloved friend lay hovering between heaven and earth. His weakened condition was a perfect breeding ground for infection. Everything that could possibly be done was being done. Chantal and David wondered about moving Brother Francis to a larger and more Western Hospital several hours away, but were fearful that the trip might kill him. The Chinese doctor was very humble and very honest. "Please do whatever you think best. He is your beloved friend but my advice is to let him be."

David Gold used his detective skills when he spoke with Mei Li's father-in-law. The man responded to David's unspoken implication that he had anything to do with Brother Francis being shot with an explanation. He told David that he was walking in the opposite direction from Brother Francis when he heard the shot. Having spoken with the monk gave him a lot to think about. He saw a goodness in him that made him question his own bitter attitude. He was reflecting on all of this when he heard the shot which he first took to be that from a hunter, like the one that felled his own son.

Maybe, maybe not, David thought.

Chantal felt like she was being watched as she examined the area where Brother Francis met a bullet. It was a long time since her Girl Scout days but the skills that she learned had survived the years. She heard a twig snap in a way that was inconsistent with the rest of the sounds around her. She turned swiftly and stared at the area she thought the sound came from. She was sure there was someone in khakis hiding in the foliage. She made believe that she didn't suspect anything and continued running her fingers through the earth looking for whatever she could find. This time there were a considerable amount of twigs cracking and she turned to see her dear husband take a flying leap onto the man in khaki.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here? You don't look like you're from around here," said the detective to a Western woman in her mid-twenties.

"Neither do you two."

"We know the people here and have permission to be here. What about you?"

The young woman began to run but Chantal blocked her path and the interloper wound up tumbling to the ground over the clinician's back.

They bound the hands of the girl and walked her toward Mr. Chen's house. They didn't want to upset the children by taking him to Mei Li's house.

The father-in-law recognized the hatred on the face of the young woman. "I have been like you for most of my life. Believe me, woman, it's not worth it."

"How would you know? You're probably not even Catholic."



*Quan Yin, the Chinese Bodhisattva (helper of others) of compassion.*



## CHAPTER 35 - CHINA

The co-founders' spiritual son was literally ecstatic. "I have spent my life reading your letters and trying to practice the Gospel in accord with the way the two of you did. I know you are both canonized saints and I am far from that. The truth be told, I don't hold a great deal of importance with the process of canonization. I think saints are those who live decent lives. The canonization process is simply a way of pointing out role models for the rest of us who need it."

St. Francis de Sales smiled peacefully. "I so agree, my brother. As you know, I was the first one to undergo the process of canonization. I was investigated and our dear mother Jane de Chantal even had to testify about my life before an ecclesiastical court. There were some miracles wrought by God, not me, and then I was proclaimed a saint. Prior to that process it was the people who determined who saints are. If someone lived a good life the people would pray to that person, miracles would happen, and that person became a saint automatically, so I understand your point."

"I'm not completely certain what's happening at the moment. Perhaps I'm in some altered state of consciousness. The clinical psychologist in me can't help but give it some sort of scientific name. The monk in me, however, wonders if I'm having a spiritual experience--or even if I am dead."

This time St. Jane de Chantal smiled peacefully. "I suppose we could say that you are somewhere between physical life and New Life. What would you like to do Brother Francis? Would you prefer to stay here with us and the others and actually encounter God in a new way, or do you choose to return to your life as a human being?"

"It is wonderful to be here, my spiritual mother, and the lower part of my soul says that I want to stay here and enjoy this peace and beauty and blessed rest. The higher part of my soul, however, truly wants to do what is most in harmony with God's will for me."

Then both saints smiled peacefully.

Theresa and her cousin Mei Li rotated shifts night and day for several days, keeping vigil over the monk who hovered somewhere between life and death. They felt half asleep even though it was the middle of the day. Brother Francis looked like a corpse, yet the doctor felt a quality of qi, or vitality, within the monk that suggested otherwise. On a human level it looked as if his patient would soon be dead, but on a spiritual level he had a sense that this was not the human end of this very unusual man.

He took the twelve pulses of the monk again. Six of the pulses were felt on one wrist, and six of them on the other. The fire element was weakening and this was a good sign, as was the fact that the water element was increasing. The doctor prayed to the Medicine Buddha for his Christian patient while the patient's friend who was keeping vigil prayed to Jesus. The monk's eyes began to flutter and, in a rasping voice, he asked for some water.

They excitedly sat him up a little and gave him little sips of water. Brother Francis had a strange mixture of relief and disappointment on his face. Then he asked, "What about the parchments?"

## CHATER 36 - CHINA

Mr. Chen just looked at the young woman. His eyes seemed to penetrate into the dark heart of the captive. He didn't take the bait she offered. The father-in-law just stared and didn't ask what the enigmatic statement about not being Catholic meant. He thought he knew the source of her hatred.

David and Chantal were about to speak but one glance from Mei Li's father-in-law silenced them. It appeared that the father-in-law could read the psyche of this unsettling young woman quite well.

"I hope I killed him this time. I hate all Catholics and this monk is 'Exhibit A' of Catholicism, and so I want him gone. Why he even likes Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and Protestants! I read about it in the newspapers and heard him on the radio."

The father-in-law smiled. "To hate any one entire group only creates a prison for yourself. I'm learning that these days. We all need to work together to break this vicious cycle. When was the other time you tried to kill Brother Francis?"

The youth waved her head in the direction of David and Chantal. "Those two know."

The forensic psychologist and the detective got it in an instant. "A lot of folks thought that was an accident, but *you* must have been the one who shot Brother Francis last year during hunting season," the detective roared. Lots of people thought the menacing letter found in the monastery mailbox from the one who admitted to the attempt on Brother Francis' life was simply the writing of a crack pot. Maybe it was.

Chantal calmed her husband, who was beginning to lose his temper.

"The only thing accidental about those events is that the monk didn't die. I was raised a Catholic and have no time for the Church anymore. I need my freedom."

Chantal spoke up. "I think Brother Francis would tell you that, whether you believe in God or not, we are all created to be free. No one is keeping you inside or outside of Christianity. It's time for you to take charge of your own behavior and not let your hatred be an excuse for not being a decent person."

The Chinese government graciously sent a police van to put the would-be murderer in incarceration until she could be returned to the United States. Chantal and David flew back to Pennsylvania and their prisoner was escorted back by an air marshal on a different plane. Her intended victim had forgiven the woman and offered to facilitate treatment she would need if possible.



*Episcopal seal of Francis de Sales.*



## CHAPTER 37 - CHINA

Mei Li was beginning a new chapter of her life. The local Chinese doctor encouraged her to work for him and study with as his disciple. She would develop the rudimentary Chinese medicine skills she already possessed in order to help others and provide for her family's future. The grateful woman gave Brother Francis a gentle embrace as he entered Theresa's minivan for the drive back to her house. The bumpy trip evoked a few electrical jolts in his shoulder but was otherwise uneventful. That evening the tired monk sat quietly in his room in Theresa's house and read a few lines from the ancient parchments.

"Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God," St. Francis de Sales wrote.

St. Jane de Chantal responded with, "I shall always remember when you told me to do all through love and nothing through fear."

Brother Francis flew back to Pennsylvania thoughtfully. He had an intimate encounter with both of his founders, both through their hidden letters, as well as through his encounter with them in what some might call a "near-death experience."

Brother Matthew picked up his abbot at the airport and got the jet-lagged monk back to his little community. Several days later the community held a chapter, a community meeting which traditionally opened with a chapter from the rule of the monastery being read aloud, during which everyone brought one another up to date.

Brother Francis and Mei Li's father-in-law had a long talk while the abbot recuperated. He asked Brother Francis for a blessing before they parted for the last time. The Abbot placed both hands on Mr. Chen's head and recited a prayer from Trappist monk Thomas Merton. It was as if Merton, who gave the world deeper insight into monastic life by his writings, was speaking to the two new friends:

*Help us to be masters of the weapons that threaten to master us. Help us to use science for peace and plenty, not for war and destruction. Show us how to use atomic power to bless our children's children, not to blight them. Save us from the compulsion to follow our adversaries in all that we most hate, confirming them in their hatred and suspicion of us. Resolve our inner contradictions, which now grow beyond belief and beyond bearing. They are at once a torment and a blessing: for if you had not left us the light of conscience, we would not have to endure them. Teach us to be long-suffering in anguish and insecurity, teach us to wait and trust. Grant light, grant strength and patience to all who work for peace. Grant us prudence in proportion to our power, wisdom in proportion to our science, humaneness in proportion to our wealth and might. And bless our earnest will to help all races and peoples to travel, in friendship with us, along the road to justice, liberty and lasting peace. (Merton, 1981)*

A cycle of pain, destruction, and hatred that may have spanned centuries had finally been broken. Mei Li's father-in-law was free. He was much more at peace and it looked like the Salesian family had a new member—one who would devote the rest of his life to studying the scriptures and Salesian writings and doing whatever good he could during his remaining years. His daughter-in-law and grandchildren had someone to lean on and love.

The abbot showed the community the old parchments. Sister Scholastica had them carefully duplicated and then the originals were passed on to the Salesian Resource Center in

Stella Niagara, New York, for further study and publication. Both the parchments and the abbot had finally made it home safely.

## CHAPTER 38 - PENNSYLVANIA

Clare looked serene in her simple gray tunic. She sat in the back of the oratory as everyone gathered there to see her received into the community as a novice. Brother Francis presided from a plain wooden chair with a worn red fabric cushion, in front of the wooden altar that the late Brother Benedict had made. Clare walked up to the almost completely healed abbot, and he, smiling broadly, stood to greet her and begin the ceremony.

Abbot Francis:

“My Sister, what do you ask?”

Postulant Clare:

“I ask to begin my novitiate, so that I may grow in following Christ in the spirit of the Salesian Monastic Community.”

Abbot Francis:

“Let us Pray: Almighty and eternal God, from whom comes vocations to every state of life, hear the prayers of your servant Clare, who wishes to become a part of our Salesian family in a deeper way. Through the intercession of our holy founders, Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, be pleased to confirm her in her desire. Reveal to her the fruitfulness and value of the hidden life with Christ in God as she lives and studies the rule and vows of the Salesian Monastic Community.”

Abbot Francis placed a white scapular and veil on the new novice and then continued:

“Cover her, Lord, with the cloak of innocence and the robe of love. My God, do not let her appear before you stripped of good works.”

Abbot Francis:

“You will be known in monastic life as ‘Sister Clare Margaret,’ after our Visitation sister saint, to whom appeared the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”

Abbot Francis:

“Let us offer one another the sign of peace.”

*Suaviter Sed Fortiter*  
(Gentle but Strong)



*The two spiritual friends in their later years.*

## References

Merton, T. (1981). *Nonviolent Alternative* (Merton's Prayer for Peace). New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

All graphics in *NIGHT PRAYER from the Office of the Dead* that are marked with an asterisk have been provided through the generosity of the International Commission for Salesian Studies.  
<http://www.franz-von-sales.de/>

The remaining photographs, with the exception of the author's picture, were taken by the writer during his journeys to China.

Front cover: Francis de Sales beginning a night of writing.\*  
*Franz von Sales schreibt einen Brief - aus einem französischen Kinderbuch.*

1. Jane Frances Fremyot de Chantal (1572-1641).\*  
(No location reference cited.)

2. Chinese roadside shrine.

3. Lake Annecy today, where the Salesian family was birthed.\*  
*Blick auf die Basilika und das Kloster der Heimsuchung in Annecy, Frankreich.*

4. The statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance, the Black Madonna, in front of which Francis de Sales was released from his spiritual crisis.\*  
*Unsere Liebe Frau von der Guten Erlösung - die Schwarze Madonna von St. Etienne des Gres. Heute in der Kirche der Schwestern des hl. Thomas von Villanova in Neuilly, Paris, Frankreich. Vor dieser Madonna betete Franz von Sales bei seiner Krise in Paris.*

5. The founding of the Visitation of Holy Mary, a depiction created for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Visitation of Holy Mary. The biblical visitation of Mary to Elizabeth creates the backdrop.\*  
*Jubiläumspakat 400 Jahre Heimsuchung in Annecy, Frankreich.*

6. The mountains of China, wrapped in mist in background.

7. French manuscript from 1610 containing the names of the first Visitation nuns.\*  
*Noviziatsbuch der Heimsuchung Mariens in Annecy von 1610. Hier haben sich alle Novizinnen der Heimsuchung ab der Gründung 6.6.1610 eingetragen. Hier die erste Seite. Archiv der Heimsuchungsklosters von Annecy, Frankreich.*

8. Chinese Buddhist temple.

9. St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and the Salesian profession (vow) cross.\*  
*Grafik der Oblaten des hl. Franz von Sales, Brasilien, von Michael Moore osfs.*

10. St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, to whom the Sacred Heart of Jesus appeared.\*  
*Margareta Maria Alacoque, Gemälde im Heimsuchungskloster in Palermo, Italien.*

11. Daoist temple in China.

12. Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, VHM, the original inspiration and co-foundress of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales.\*

*Gemälde im Mutterhaus der Oblatinnen des hl. Franz von Sales in Troyes, Frankreich, Ausschnitt.*

13. Father Louis Brisson, OSFS, co-founder of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales.\*

(No location reference cited.)

14. Mother Frances de Sales Aviat, OSFS, (St. Leonie), first Oblate Sister.\*

(No location reference cited.)

15. Stream between Mei Li's home and her father-in-law's property, with turtles sunbathing on a rock at bottom of picture.

16. Logo of the Salesian Monastic Community (Pennsylvania) containing a detail from the Salesian profession cross--an olive branch rising out of Mount Calvary.

17. Chinese countryside, with a stone footpath to ease the journey.

18. Quan Yin, the Chinese Bodhisattva (helper of others) of compassion.

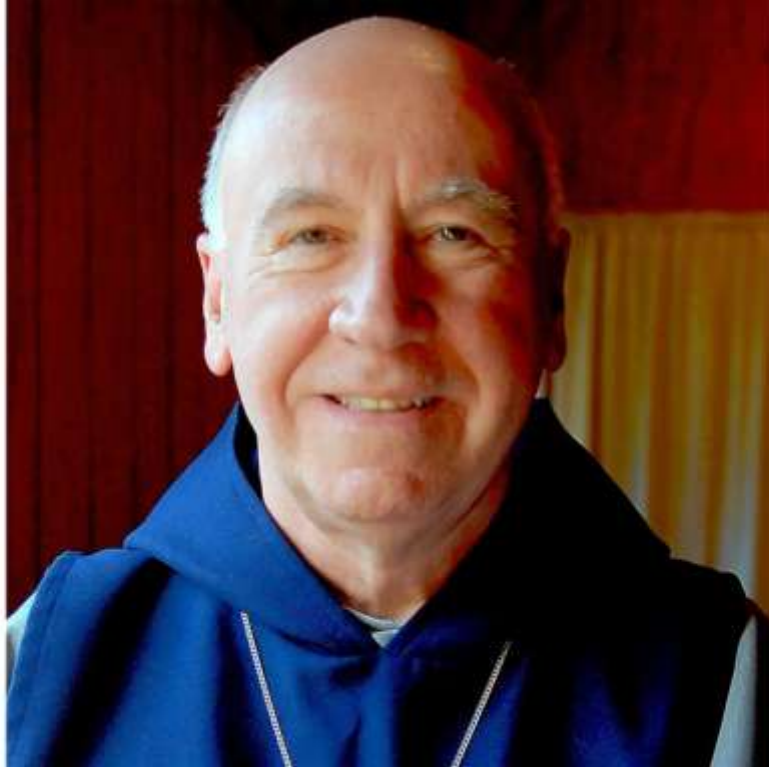
19. Episcopal seal of Francis de Sales.\*

*Bischofssigel des hl. Franz von Sales, Kloster der Heimsuchung in Annecy, Frankreich.*

20. The two spiritual friends in their later years.\*

*Zeichnung von Michael McGrath osfs, Samarpanaram, Indien.*

Back cover: Author photograph courtesy of the *Pocono Record* newspaper.



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Brother / Doctor Bernard Seif, SMC, EdD, DNM is a Christian monk with private monastic vows in the Roman Catholic and Salesian traditions. He is also vowed and knighted in the Sacred Medical Order of the Knights of Hope and a member of the Pastoral Medical Association. Brother Bernard is a clinical psychologist, board certified in behavioral medicine, and a Doctor of Natural Medicine specializing in Chinese Medicine. Doctor Seif has devoted almost half a century to immersing himself into the lives of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century French founders of his Salesian spiritual lineage, Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales. Numerous trips to Asia, both for clinical training and charitable work, bring a depth and authenticity to his Chinese medical practice as well as to his writing. The presenter is an avid mystery reader, although he often prefers to listen to them on his mp3 player while hiking. This combination of spirituality and mystery blossomed into his *Office of the Dead* series of monastic mystery books.