

Women, Gender, and Religion

Edited by Susan Calef and Ronald A. Simkins

The Ambiguously Gendered Ideal of a Seventeenth Century Community of Women Religious

The Visitation of Holy Mary

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Introduction

I desire that the daughters of our congregation have feet that are well-shod but hearts that are bare and naked of all earthly affection, that they might have heads that are well-covered and spirits that are un-covered and a perfect simplicity and absence of self-will (François de Sales: XIV.232).

[1] In a letter, written in 1609 to his friend and collaborator Jeanne de Chantal, Bishop François de Sales thus described what he hoped would be the ideal spirit of the sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary, the women's congregation which the two of them were in the process of imagining and which would be founded in the following year (for a discussion of the Visitation spirit, see Dompnier and Julia: 413-16). This essay attempts to explore the gendered implications of that Visitation spirit when viewed against the backdrop of the early modern historical and cultural moment and the theological vision that François de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal espoused.

The Visitation of Holy Mary and the Ideal of the Visitation Sister

[2] The Congregation, later Order, of the Visitation of Holy Mary was founded in 1610 in the provincial town of Annecy in Savoy, which was then the seat of the exiled Catholic Bishop of Geneva. This women's community was one among many of the innovative religious foundations that emerged from the reforming impulses of the long Catholic reformation. Communities such as these both reflected and fostered the reforming zeal that motivated the Catholic arm of the greater European Christian reformation. The Visitation co-founders, French-speaking Savoyard and noted spiritual writer François de Sales and the widowed French baroness Jeanne Françoise Frémyot de Chantal, saw that there was a need in the Church of their day for a place for women who, like the widow de Chantal, were profound lovers of God and felt a call to some sort of intentional religious life but who, because of advanced or tender age, widowed status, familial responsibility, frail health, or physical disability, could not qualify as entrants to one of the austere reformed communities popular at the time. Women such as these needed a flexible and moderate rule that emphasized interior rather than external discipline. Jesuit trained de Sales, imbued with the creative spirit of a newly reformed Catholic Christendom, responded to that need by establishing this new community. It was to be characterized not only by its structural innovation but by its distinctive spirituality.

[3] The Salesian spiritual tradition that François and his co-founder Jeanne originated was conceived as first and foremost an interior matter – a matter of the heart (on Salesian spirituality see Wright 2004; Wright and Power: 9-86). People in all walks of life, they believed, were being called to *Vive Jesus* (*Live Jesus*) through a transformation of heart. Human hearts, they felt, were created in the divine image and likeness and thus intrinsically inclined to the good and to God; yet human nature was also wounded through sin, and hearts often failed to beat with the rhythm of the divine heart. Thus a human-divine heart, the heart of the crucified Christ, was needed to enter and, as it were, align the arrhythmic human heart. This transformation of heart took place on the vertical plane – through prayer and inspiration – but equally on the horizontal plane – through loving communication of all sorts between persons whose hearts were open to living Jesus. The Visitation of Holy Mary was established as a community that would embody this spiritual vision. The sisters would (to paraphrase St. Paul) “no longer live but let Christ live in them” through imitation of Mary, the one whose heart was most closely aligned with the heart of her Son Jesus. They would practice the “little virtues” exemplified by the One who invited all to “Come and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Matthew 11:29-30). The little, relational virtues were those all persons, in every walk of life, could practice: humility, gentleness, simplicity, patience, cordiality, and charity. Other, much admired and heroic, virtues such as courage, magnanimity, and great generosity were estimable but rarely called for in most circumstances.

[4] Salesian spirituality was thus not primarily monastic or physically ascetic in orientation. Indeed, it could be lived out in any walk of life in variant ways. But the Visitation institute was to embody the Salesian spirit in the context of religious community. Foundress Jeanne de Chantal, writing characteristically to one of the many superiors of the Visitation houses (on de Chantal as a spiritual guide, see Dompnier and Julia: 335-44; Wright 1990), stressed

the union of hearts and gentle practices of religious formation that should characterize her community.

Believe me, an affectionate and motherly love along with a gentle and thoughtful firmness win over all hearts. Continue to make this spirit your own in just such ways and you and all the sisters will profit from it (V.625; 1638 letter to Francoise-Angelique de la Croix, translation by the author).

[5] While advancement in virtue was the aim of Visitation formation, such formation was thought to be best accomplished by encouragement rather than punishment. She would write to another Visitation superior:

Yes, it is not wise to reprimand the sisters for every little fault. The mind grows weary of that and gets so used to it that it gradually becomes insensitive to correction. When a correction must be made, it is better to put it off a little while and do it graciously in private (I.230; 1619 letter to Charlotte de Brechard at Moulins).

Jeanne led her community by “winning hearts.” Attentive to the differing developmental capacities of her spiritual daughters, she inclined charitably toward beginners and adapted her direction to the differing emotional and temperamental needs of her charges. But all was to be done with the aim of winning the heart for Love in the characteristic Visitation manner.

Try to establish solidly the spirit of the Visitation which aims at a perfection as excellent as it is hidden . . . You know that the perfection of the Visitation is not founded on extraordinary things, but on the solid and true virtues: true humility, gentle charity, affectionate mutual support, prompt and simple obedience, artlessness and sincerity toward one’s superior, frank admission of our faults, tranquil modesty, pleasant and devout conversation, and attentiveness to the holy presence (VI, sans date).

[6] Yet because they were in a religious community and, as such, heirs to the ascetic tradition and enjoined to live their Salesian charism with serious dedication, the gentle cordiality that the sisters were to enjoy would be prepared for and accompanied by a serious self-surrender and total abandonment to the will of God. This uncompromising spirit was to be inculcated in those “advanced” in the spiritual life. In a letter to a superior whose desire to be a humble lay sister was, in Jeanne’s view, a form of inordinate attachment and false humility, she advised:

My dearest daughter, it would be out of the question for me to flatter you or treat you too delicately since you place so much trust in me and allow me to speak freely. I think Our Lord has given you a spirit that can overcome its strong inclinations, worthy as they may seem to be. To move beyond them is the greatest sacrifice you can make to the Lord. As for that old hankering of yours to be a domestic sister, take my word for it, our Blessed father’s [François de Sales] advice to “ask for nothing refuse nothing” is far superior to this desire of yours or any other self-chosen practice of humility (VI, sans date).

[7] The original structure of the Visitation that facilitated this gracious, grace-filled sort of community was flexible. It was not intended to be an enclosed, contemplative community, nor was it to be an active community with a specific apostolate.¹ Within a few years, as a result of its moving into dioceses where the strict dictates of the Council of Trent were being implemented, the Visitation was enclosed. Still it retained its original spirit and spread rapidly. By the time of Jeanne's death in 1641 over eighty daughter houses had sprung up.

François de Sales, the Little Virtues, and the Virgin Mary in the Early Modern Catholic World

[8] The Virgin Mary was the patroness of the order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, and the mystery of the Visitation, revealed in the scriptural passage that narrates the young, newly pregnant Mary of Nazareth's visit to her older, pregnant cousin Elizabeth, was the mystery that the religious community founded by François and Jeanne was said to embody. Much has been written about the way that the Visitation order was understood to be a lived exegesis of Luke 1:39-56 (cf. Lemaire).² Suffice it to say that the Mary that the seventeenth century founders honored was very much a reflection of the ecclesial spirit of their day. As Donna Spivey-Ellington has shown, the Mariology of the early modern Catholic world, like spirituality more generally, was marked not only by the reforming impulses that swept through European Christendom, it also reflected the cultural transition from an oral to a literate society. The result was a more spiritualized understanding of faith. The stress was put on inward prayer, introspection, moral convictions, and vital personal appropriation more than on external means of communicating with God. The Mary of the period was extolled as an exemplar of the new interiorized piety of the time; self-controlled, virtuous, especially humble and obedient, she was the mirror of what the model Christian was to be (see also Diefendorf). The inner life, especially the acquisition of virtues, was the arena of spiritual focus. The early modern Virgin was just such a practitioner of the "little virtues" so extolled by François and Jeanne. She was the perfect model of the human person whose heart and life was transformed through the mystery of God-with-us.³ In fact, Salesian spirituality itself has been described by Spivey-Ellington as being exemplary of this early modern shift in religious sensibility.

[9] It is fitting at this point to place this Marian model extolled in the Visitation community against the backdrop of early modern assumptions about gender. The Salesian way (the spirituality the two founders practiced, so named for de Sales) was not conceived of as

¹ This point is often misunderstood by scholars who argue that, because it was conceived as having a mitigated cloister, it was an active community. It was not, being its own hybrid creation (see Wright 1994).

² Lemaire stresses the way in which the prime virtues of humility and charity, central to the spirituality of the community, are understood by the founders to be displayed in the Lucan story and to be the virtues that the Virgin herself most perfectly possessed (see too Bordes and her work in Dompnier and Julia: 69-88; Chorpenning).

³ Interestingly, it is in the seventeenth century that devotion to Mary's heart flowered. The great promoter of this devotion, Jean Eudes, was anticipated in this by François and Jeanne. The point here is that it was not primarily Mary's maternity, her giving birth to the savior, or her maternal presence as intercessor or patroness that was the focus of the new devotion; it was her heart, her interiority, the specific inner qualities that made her imitable.

specifically a woman's spiritual path, although many women were attracted to the Savoyard Bishop, to his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and to the Visitation itself. There is a sense in which one might say that Salesian spirituality emphasized virtues and qualities that were, and still are, often associated with women. Certainly the "little virtues" and the lack of agency suggested by the practice of surrender of the will might be correctly viewed as qualities typically ascribed to women.

[10] Of course, one might also observe that some of the most enduring virtues idealized in the long Christian spiritual traditions such as humility, obedience, and simplicity are the antithesis of virtues such as courage and fortitude often associated with authority, power, and masculinity. Set alongside other orders emerging from the early modern period with their distinctive spiritual emphases, the Salesian tradition, then, does feel gendered as feminine. For example, the Jesuits, who educated de Sales, were his spiritual guides throughout his life, and were thought by him and by Jeanne to be the most apt confessors for the far-flung Visitation houses, promoted a spirituality that strikes one as bold, agential, and forceful. It is not merely the military language that dominates the Jesuit *Spiritual Exercises* but the entire tone of Ignatian discourse which, while it has a strong Christian humanist family resemblance to Salesian spirituality, is distinctively "masculine."

Salesian Views of Women

[11] With that observation, it might be useful to consider what the founders of the Visitation's views were on women and how those views related to gender perceptions current at the time. Although in other areas it is possible to distinguish between Jeanne and François' perspectives, on the question of the role of women it is not clear that their ideas can be sorted out; thus, the following discussion will focus on the views of the Savoyard bishop. To begin with, it is true that the bishop had a special feel for ministry to women. His popular *Introduction to the Devout Life* was addressed to the feminine reader, "Philothea," and the only religious institute he founded was expressly for women. He valued the religious insights of the women around him; it is generally acknowledged that it was his contact with Jeanne and the early Visitation community through his role as confessor and advisor that enhanced his insights into the mystical life and that formed the basis for the central chapters of his seminal work, *Treatise on the Love of God* (see Stopp, esp. chap. 8). The question is, how much does this valuation of women reflect opinion current at the time, what is at its root, and how much are his views related to his deeper theological vision?

[12] French scholar Linda Timmermans has recently published the results of her exhaustive research of women and culture during the *ancien regime*. In her study, de Sales emerges as a hinge figure, holding views of women that are rooted both in theological and social traditionalism and yet reflecting progressive currents of his day. Timmermans' thesis, which goes well beyond François and his era, is that the cultural quarrel about women and their capabilities that had long agitated French society, took paradoxical forms during the seventeenth century: new fields of activity were opened to women while at the same time social forces strove to contain them in traditional roles. Especially the early part of the century, during the flowering of the Catholic reform, was, she argues, a time when women were allowed unprecedented access to culture. However, "the epic of religious effervescence provoked by Catholic reform was a parenthesis in a period extending from the Renaissance

to the nineteenth century where the enterprise was the ‘domestication of women’” (809ff.). She points to phenomena like the influential salons established by intellectually gifted aristocratic females and by well-healed pious women. Certainly the spiritual clearing house hosted by Barb Acarie, where the young bishop de Sales was to be seen during his sojourns in Paris and where he met ecclesial luminaries such as Pierre de Bérulle and Joseph Condron, is such an example. In like manner, Timmermans views the many significant male-female spiritual friendships that flowered at the time as part of the access that women were gaining to society.

[13] Timmermans contends that the arena in which women’s influence was most strongly felt in the Catholic reform was in the realm of mysticism, with its anti-intellectualism, affective orientation, and primacy of experience over reason. In the mystical realm a woman (to paraphrase Michel de Certeau) was permitted to “inscribe herself on the text of society” and make herself known in domains generally closed to her. This occurred through non-clerical spiritual direction, spiritual friendship and edifying example. Timmermans sees this influence diminished at the end of the seventeenth century as the conflicts around Quietism and Jansenism coincided with a growing emphasis on moralism and theological conformity. In addition, European culture more and more stressed submission to both the church and the state. The Protestant Huguenot minority was expelled from France and under Louis XIV political and religious authority was more and more restricted. This was part of a larger pan-European cultural trend toward institutional centralization and homogenization in the family, the nation, and the church. The result was a deep distrust of the religious imagination, subjective experience, heterodoxy, and the mystical. Timmermans concludes that, although at the end of the century in the secular realm women retained some of their cultural capital and even expanded it, in the religious arena women were more restricted. She thus sees the conditions of the earlier period of “effervescence” during which the Visitation was founded as passing away. Clearly Timmermans’ concern in her scholarly research is to assess the extent to which seventeenth century women were granted access to cultural resources such as education, could be in positions of religious authority, or could influence critical cultural decision-making. Her overarching view is that women in this period were influential because the Catholic Reform created a space in which that could happen and provided a theological justification for it by affirming the value of the affective, mystical and the non-rational. When these became suspect, women’s influence decreased.

[14] As she focuses on the period of “effervescence,” Timmermans unpacks for her readers the theological and philosophical basis for Bishop de Sales’ positive valuation of women. She shows him to be very much a “hinge figure” straddling the late medieval and early modern worlds. She situates his thought in the context of the gradual Christian “myth” (so named by Michel de Certeau) that emerged from the fourteenth to the end of the seventeenth century in western Christianity, namely, that the “poor” favored by God were being replaced by the “*savage*.” The lowly, unlearned, the humble, the simple, the laity, the shepherd, as well as the poor: these became God’s chosen. Timmermans also underscores the extent to which women were doubly seen as *savage*: not only were they lowly because of their lack of theological education and social status, they were also the lowly opposite of the male ecclesial clerical hierarchy precisely because of their sex.

[15] Bishop de Sales, in keeping with many of his contemporaries, did assume that women were the weaker and more ignorant sex (see also the work of Maclean). However, because for him the way to God was not primarily through the intellect but through the will, the simple, i.e., the woman, was as capable of loving God as the most learned men of the world. Women in his view were by nature “predisposed to divine love.” Their ignorance rendered them simple and, therefore, capable of love more than their male counterparts who could easily succumb to the sin of pride. A woman was a “soft wax” that easily received the divine imprint. Feminine worldly ignorance was in his eyes in fact well adapted to the mode of mystic knowing. Echoing Saint Paul, François affirmed that God most clearly demonstrates divine power and perfection in weakness. It followed that feminine sanctity, of which the bishop was a champion, was a witness to the power of God (Timmermans: 502ff.).

[16] There were early modern commentators who, from a twenty-first century perspective, held much more progressive views of female capability than the Bishop. Some of the champions of women’s equality and innate intellectual gifts and capabilities were Jesuit Father Lemoyne and the remarkable Marie de Gournay (see Ilsley). Nevertheless, de Sales has striking things to say about a “feminine apostolate.” He made the distinction between the “office” of an apostle and “apostolic dignity.” The latter involved an official public ministry invested by Christ, which he saw as continuing in the clerical state. The former, however, also had another, less official task, one also given by Christ: to live an abundant life and thus become a “good example.” This apostolic mission was open to women. Perhaps an even stronger term might convey this idea more accurately: one might become an “exemplar.” In a sermon given to the Visitation community on the feast of Pentecost, the Savoyard described this apostolic task as truly a specific mission in the church, one in which the one who is a good example recapitulates Pentecost itself. In de Sales’ mind women thus participated in the office of the apostolic mission without actually expressing its dignity (Timmermans: 533ff.).

[17] While appreciating them, I would nuance Timmermans’ insights to suggest several things. First, Timmermans’ thesis that women’s access to culture within the ecclesial realm diminished after the first half of the century has not been generally agreed upon. A more common view is that, despite very real strictures, through the growing number of communities of apostolic orientation women came to be more and more actively involved in the church as the seventeenth century progressed. For example, Elizabeth Rapley has documented the rise of French groups like the Ursulines and the more generalized movement of lay and lower class women involved in socially important work that she claims, “represent a triumph of one set of Tridentine values over another,” namely, that the obligation to instruct and minister to the faithful triumphed over the immediate aim of the Catholic Reformation to return to discipline and regularity by enclosing female communities and tying them more closely to clerical authority” (118). More recently Patricia Ranft has subtly explored the way in which women’s seemingly increased involvement coexisted with the ecclesial narrowing of formal opportunities by focusing on the combined role of the confessor-spiritual director that, she says, paradoxically allowed women to accomplish ground breaking work in society while under obedience to their confessor-directors. Ranft interprets François de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal’s fabled friendship from this perspective.

When they submitted themselves completely and irrevocably to their confessor-spiritual directors, they participated in a penitential system that allowed the hierarchy to preserve external order and rectify interior moral order [both clearly articulated aims of the Catholic reform] and gave women unusual freedom of action and speech (21).

[18] Second, for François de Sales the “lowly ones” and “little things” were not simply chosen to reveal God to the powerful or as powerful, as Timmermans suggests. Instead, the lowly ones and the little virtues were eschatological in nature. They anticipated the promised kingdom that Jesus inaugurated. The kingdom of God was, he assumed, best imaged by radical reversal, by the subversion of the way things are. For the Savoyard the arena in which the kingdom might “come” was an interior one. The Jesus of Matthew 11, offering his gentle, humble heart for imitation, was not merely a comforting figure but one who pointed to a new way of being in the world. Clearly, the bishop was no political radical: he lived in an era in which the divine right of kings was assumed and he assumed it. Yet his ultimate vision was not a patronizing one where the poor, the deaf, the female, or the disabled were merely the recipients of charity. Nor were they simply instrumental. They were, like all human beings, beloved. Their being raised above the status assigned to them by society and even by their own natures was a sign of the radical nature of God’s promised kingdom and the mysterious and expectation-altering ways that God works. The Visitation order was a concrete embodiment of this principle. The Virgin Mary, singing out her *Magnificat* that proclaimed that the proud will be humbled and the lowly cast down was, of course, the prototype for this radical revelation of reversal. When de Sales and Mother de Chantal made much of the interior dispositions of Mary, encouraging their spiritual daughters to emulate her, they were envisioning an eschatologically-oriented world of transformed human hearts.

[19] Third, the assertion that women may be apostolic by being good examples may be, frankly, rather timid or patronizing to modern ears. De Sales was, of course, working within the thought world and structures of his era. But even with that caveat, the idea of being an example or an exemplar may have had much more weight and resonance for his contemporaries than it does four centuries later. Specifically, the widespread early modern habit of emblematic thinking, most concretely manifested in the popularity of emblems and emblem books, makes much of the power of example (cf. Garbart; *Emblamata Sacra*). The Jesuit order particularly promoted the use of emblems – images produced by human imagination to make visible the invisible or abstract – in their methods of religious formation and catechesis. Meditation on the emblem could appeal to memory, imagination and will, the faculties of the soul, and could help visualize the spiritual journey and convey truths about divine love (*Emblamata Sacra*: 15ff.). More deeply, the popularity of emblems reflects a religious predisposition intrinsic to the sacramental Christian humanist perspective (and both Ignatian and Salesian traditions can be identified as such), which would insist that the invisible can be both visualized and actually made visible through the mediums of the created order. Human beings thus can be sacramental symbols of a sacred reality. Saints are such religious symbols: they participate in the reality to which they point. Exemplary Visitation sisters could function this way as well.

Conclusion

[20] This early modern Salesian view of women, which assumed their importance in the divine scheme and their embodiment of the virtues that were eschatologically significant, underlies the vision of the Visitation of Holy Mary in its first years. The little virtues that were at the center of the Visitandine's life together simultaneously reflected the more inward-turning ethos of the era of civility, accorded well with cultural expectations of female behavior and, interestingly, subverted the dominant gender values of the time by ascribing an eschatological significance to "feminine" values.

[21] While both Mother de Chantal and Bishop de Sales, in common with their Catholic contemporaries, believed that those called to religious life were called to "perfection," the community that they founded together was designed to realize the perfect life in a manner shaped by the emerging spiritual and ecclesial climate of the early modern world. The Visitation sisters were to practice an interior asceticism that focused on the transformation of heart expressed in the cultivation of the little virtues. Humility, gentleness, simplicity, cordiality and the like were understood as issuing from a heart, like Jesus', that surrendered itself to the divine will. In the eyes of the founders, women, as the "weaker" sex, were especially disposed to this sort of surrender, as God was perceived as working through the weak and lowly. The Virgin Mary, exemplary of the interiorized piety of the early modern church, was the model for the sisters of the Visitation. They in their turn were to be exemplars, a not insignificant role given the era's emblematic habit of mind; a role that made of women apostles, realized, if not in the clerical state, nonetheless in their state as women religious. Certainly the ideal of the Visitation sister was profoundly gendered as female; yet, while in some ways that ideal confirmed current cultural stereotypes, in other significant ways it overturned them.

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