

# Total trust in the Sacred Heart:

the example of the “good mother”  
Venerable Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, VHM

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

Not long ago I picked up a copy of an “old” biography of St. Therese written by Ida Gorres. Considered by many to be one of the best, though provocatively written some would assert; I wanted to review some of Gorres’ insights into the spirituality and life of Therese. As I began to read, I once again noticed how much Therese’s family had an impact on her life. Each member of her family was precious in her eyes, despite the outward detachment that came with her vocation to the strict life of a Carmelite nun. Therese treasured both the living and deceased members of her family with a remarkable devotion, holding them ever dearer, even as she matured in her spiritual ascent.

Our families, yes, even our spiritual families mean so much to us. In the spiritual family of St. Francis de Sales, our holy founder, there are innumerable offshoots that have tried to give timely expression to his appealing spirit of “living Jesus” in the way of gentleness and humility. God has inspired others with his spirit, such as St. John Bosco who founded the Salesian fathers and brothers; one of the larger religious congregations in the Church. It was said that even during his lifetime, St. Francis de Sales wished to found more communities, especially a men’s community to be the counterpart of the Visitation sisters. However, only years later did this actually occur through the initiative of a Visitation nun in our monastery at Troyes, France. Her name was Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis and she came to be known as the “Good Mother” due to her innate abilities to draw people’s hearts to the Heart of Jesus. She possessed exceptional graces to discern the will of God, not only in her own life but in the lives of others. She was highly instrumental in her influence upon the founders of two further Salesian communities: the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales and the Oblate (Fathers and Brothers) of St. Francis de Sales. For us today, who are interested in learning more about Sacred Heart spirituality, it is her teachings and example that can help to shed light upon our own journey toward union with the Heart of Jesus.

Because of her own deep interior life of prayer as a Visitation nun, steeped in the writings of St. Francis de Sales, and her winning warmth of heart, she assumed important positions, as Novice Mistress and then Superior. Only in her thirties she became superior of the Visitation monastery in Troyes, and helped restore the foundational spirit of the regular observance that had eroded over the course of years in which the monastery was tainted with jansenistic practices. She was most particularly dedicated to the Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales, which was long neglected in use, and ardently advocated its practices, especially that of keeping oneself in the continual presence of God. She saw this practice as a means of reparation (for personal sins and for the sins of others). Some felt that she tended to overemphasize the importance of the Directory because of her enthusiastic way of speaking about it; but there is no doubt that she had a profound insight into its value and that she only wished to turn other’s hearts more deeply toward the Heart of Jesus.

Two valuable teachings emerged from the “Good Mother’s” fidelity to her Salesian practices. They came to be known as “the way” and “couper-court.” Succinctly, “the way” meant the soul’s acceptance of present circumstances as God’s good pleasure. It implied a deep, deep trustfulness of God’s providence over everything that happens. “It is the union of our whole selves with our Lord by our actions, our desires, our sentiments and affection, our heart” (as explained by the founder of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, Louis Brisson, OSFS). Those who wish to place themselves in “the way” give their whole heart to the Lord, without holding anything back. The “Good Mother” clearly saw this practice as having immense ramifications for renewing the world. When we will our intentions to be those of God’s, we more closely align our world with God’s overall plan of salvation.

Another aspect of the Good Mother's teaching is encapsulated in the french expression "couper-court", which literally means "to cut short." Utilizing a spiritual application, it recommends that any reflections or thoughts which lead to self-indulgence, self-absorption, or self-pity and which make us unduly absorbed in ourselves, be cut short, freeing us to gently turn our hearts and minds back to an awareness of God's presence. In cultivating this practice, we derail our inner defences from mounting a confrontation on anyone and anything that opposes our self-interests. It has the value of calming us to see with more clarity what is really important in a given situation, and thereby invoking the assistance of the spirit of God.

Besides these original teachings, the Good Mother's profound intuitive knowledge of things that lie in the future, sometimes produced a disconcerting effect upon her collaborators. This was especially true in regard to the young priest who was assigned to serve the Visitation monastery and who was to become the "reluctant" founder (at least in his beginning days) of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales: Louis Brisson. This fine young priest was already on the "spiritual scanner" of the Good Mother when he began his ministrations to the souls of the Visitation Sisters in Troyes in 1843. Having made her acquaintance only once before, his very first encounter with her proved traumatic. "I am going to demand a lot of your time," she said, "God needs you to reveal his love. God has decided to open new channels of grace. His will is that I work at it; that you witness it, and that you are charged with accomplishing it." Feeling somewhat overwhelmed by her powerful words of persuasion, he demurred, saying that he had neither the gifts nor the insight to do what she was asking. Little did he realize, how unswerving her persistence would remain in his regard. Ultimately, he asked God for a sign, and received two in remarkable succession. Still, there was a lot of hesitancy and even growing resistance. As one of his biographers recounts: "He simply found it psychologically and physically too much for him. He would never survive. In the end, for him, it was simply an impossible task. Louis began to resist. He found himself intimidated by the woman. His dislike for her grew, and the whole affair was making him sick" (p. 53 of *Louis Brisson* by Dirk Koster, OSFS, 2007). It was not long before matters came to a head in the Visitation parlor visiting room. "You must surrender to God's will!" Her words were "unnerving" and direct. "I don't know what God is asking of me," he replied. "It would be much better if you simply did what I am telling you to do," she answered in reply. "Mother, leave me alone! I can't do what you want." But she pressed on! "But what if God wants it right now?" The final straw had been broken. With exasperation, and at his wit's end, he loudly affirmed: "Not even if someone is raised from the grave will I surrender to this!" At that, the Good Mother left the room, leaving poor Fr. Brisson in very poor condition. Years later he was to testify what happened next:

After about seven minutes, I opened my eyes and there I saw the Lord on the other side of the grill, about two yards from me. My first reaction was a feeling of resistance. 'Now it has happened. Now I have to give in.' But my resistance also grew stronger: 'Maybe this is just an illusion... and I began to examine the image more carefully. I stared at the feet and the sandals. I didn't dare look him into his eyes right away. I examined him the way a painter studies a model. I did not want to be misled. I wanted to be certain that what I was seeing with my own eyes was genuine and real. Slowly my gaze moved up and then I was looking into the face of the Lord. He said nothing. He looked strict and displeased with me. And I had absolutely no doubts that he was now asking me to do what the Good Mother wanted. I fell to my knees. I surrendered completely. Without a word. I experienced a profound peace and great tranquility. Throughout, I felt completely at ease. Then, the apparition disappeared. {quoted in *Louis Brisson*, p. 56}.

As the apparition finished, the Good Mother re-entered the room, saying nothing. It was over, or to really tell the truth, it was the beginning, for the good priest now slowly began to cooperate with the designs of God's will, manifested so clearly through the Good Mother's spiritual gifts. There were still hard times and bitter struggles ahead, but the work of God evolved despite the setbacks and reversals.

The Good Mother's life ended when she was 82 years old. In 1874, she was elected for the eleventh time as Superior (superior's terms are for 3 years in the Visitation Order). However, she did not feel that she would finish her term and predicted that her death was imminent. In fact she died the following year, 1875, after suffering a lengthy illness. She felt her work to be finished after laboring for sixty years as a religious. Her life was a tremendous witness of deep faith and trust in her Savior and filled with innumerable good works for the benefit of souls and for the Church's many charitable outreaches.

However, one lingering issue looms over the Good Mother's acknowledged sanctity. She did not escape the inevitable confrontation with those who did not appreciate her gifts. Her works were libeled and she was accused of falling into the heresy of Quietism (basically a tendency to calmly accept things as they are without any attempts to resist or change them, or to exercise any judgement, especially moral judgement upon them). One unrelenting enemy of her cause, a Belgian Jesuit, published a series of articles that bolstered his case against her; highly influencing an unfavorable assessment by Rome's authorities. Presently, her documents are "inaccessible" and probably "deeply" filed in some curial cabinet, waiting for the moment of God's providence, to liberate and clear her path to sainthood.

Meanwhile, within the confines of her spiritual family she is very much revered and prayed to. The Good Mother's hearty love for her vocation and her unfailing confidence in her Savior's guidance and inspiration, leave their mark on those who get to know her. May she happily help her friends (and her enemies) here below come to a greater participation in the mysteries of Divine Love.+

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*This talk on Sacred Heart Spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on February 7, 2016. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, March 6th, 2016 at 4:00 p.m.*