

12. August 2022

## Saint Jane of Chantal and the martyrdom of love

*Mk 3:31-35*

*Reading for the memorial of St. Jane of Chantal*

*At that time his mother and his brothers arrived and, standing outside, sent in a message asking for him. A crowd was sitting round him at the time the message was passed to him, 'Look, your mother and brothers and sisters are outside asking for you.' He replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those sitting in a circle round him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother.'*

Today we want to get to know one more saint from the great army of saints of our Catholic Church. In each of them we can recognise God's work in a special way. There is always a love story between the Lord and a soul who has fully corresponded to His call. Just as each person is unique, so is often his life story and vocation.

In yesterday's meditation we heard about the radical step St Clare made to undertake a strict contemplative life. Today we meet Jane Frances of Chantal, who also followed the Lord's call and thus found the path of holiness laid out for her. Both of these holy women had, in turn, a special spiritual connection with a male saint. In the case of St. Clare, it was St. Francis of Assisi; in the case of Jane Frances, it was St. Francis of Sales, bishop and founder, who was her spiritual director.

First, we will hear a brief biography of today's saint:

Jane Frances (1572- 1641) was the daughter of Benigno Frémyot, president of the Parliament of Burgundy. At the age of 20 she was married to Christophe de Rabutin, the young, wealthy and vivacious baron of Chantal. Their happy marriage was blessed with six children, only four of whom survived. After barely eight years of marriage, her husband died in a hunting accident. From then on, Jane decided to live a celibate life. For a time she frequented the Carmelite convent in Dijon, where she became clear about her vocation. She put her children in good hands (the eldest, for example, had married the brother of Francis of Sales) and was able to devote herself to her vocation.

In 1610, together with St. Francis of Sales, she founded the Order of the Visitation - the Salesian sisters or Visitandines - whose members were to lead a life of holiness without the formalised rigour of other religious orders. Of great importance to the sisters was the individual decision to follow Christ.

Of the phrases that St. Jane of Chantal left us as a legacy, I will quote those that I think may be important for many people, even if they have not been called to total separation from the world or to suffer a "blood martyrdom".

The following conversation between the saint and her sisters in community is known. Jane asked them: *"My dear daughters, many of our holy fathers in the faith, men who were pillars of the Church, did not die martyrs. Why do you think this was?"*

After having answered one by one, St. Jane said, *"Well, I myself think it was because there is another martyrdom: the martyrdom of love. Here God keeps his servants and handmaids in this present life so that they may labor for him, and he makes of them both martyrs and confessors. (...)"*.

One sister asked then what form this martyrdom took, to which Jane replied: *"Yield yourself fully to God, and you will find out! Divine love takes its sword to the hidden recesses of our inmost soul and divides us from ourselves. I know one person whom love cut off from all that was dearest to her, just as completely and effectively as if a tyrant's blade had severed spirit from body."*

On being asked by another sister how long the martyrdom would continue, she said: *"From the moment when we commit ourselves unreservedly to God, until our last breath. I am speaking, of course, of great-souled individuals who keep nothing back for themselves, but instead are faithful in love (...)"*.

This "martyrdom of love" means constantly striving to fulfil God's Will in the life situation to which one has been called. Thus the exhortation to put nothing before the love of God is put into practice. The "martyrdom of love" means dying to one's own will, and then God's love will take care that we are purified through the Holy Spirit, so that only His Will, and not ours, will be our daily bread (insofar as this is possible in our earthly existence).

It is a "sweet" and magnanimous martyrdom, because "love is strong as death" (Ct 8,6). This suffering of love is sweet, because, by undertaking such a path, it awakens more and more in the soul the love for God, which is for her the greatest sweetness and the greatest refreshment, and for which she is capable of leaving everything behind. The fact that this process involves suffering is related to the disordered attachment we still have to the things of this world and to people, which is an obstacle to the unfolding of this love. Detachment under the influence of the Holy Spirit brings suffering because the soul has become bound with a false love and needs to be unbound. However, suffering turns into joy when the respective steps are taken.

So, even if "blood martyrdom" is not foreseen for us, we can reach a high degree of holiness if we consciously and willingly fulfil the Will of God day by day, remaining faithful to this path until death, as did St. Jane of Chantal, St. Clare of Assisi and so many other saints who, even if we do not know their names and their history, shine like stars in the sky of the Church.

Let us close this meditation with a prayer of today's saint, asking that we may always fulfil the Will of the Father and thus be "brothers and sisters" of Our Lord:

*"O Lord, your eyes, which pierce even the innermost folds of my heart, see that my greatest desire is to fulfil your holy Will, but see also my helplessness. Therefore, O my Redeemer, I implore you, by your infinite mercy, to grant me the grace to fulfil your Will perfectly, so that I may praise and exalt you without end. Amen."*

*NOTE:* Beginning tomorrow we will hear a series of three Marian meditations leading up to the Feast of the Assumption. In the first, we will honour her as "Daughter of the Father"; in the second, as "Mother of the Son"; and in the third, finally, as "Bride of the Holy Spirit".