

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.

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