

"The Household Of God"
Homily of August 22, 2004
by Father Jim McGee

I think many of you may remember the saying that “imitation is the best form of flattery.” Imitation may be the best form of flattery. Perhaps there was a time in your life when you admired someone and found yourself trying to learn their particular swagger or put on or use a particular gesture. Maybe you have children or grandchildren whom you watch as they try to imitate one of their favorite basketball players with a specific move, or try to sing as one of the beloved popular singers of the time and try to sing exactly as that singer does. I have a good friend whom I remember from college. She was from Ohio, and when she got to Massachusetts, where we went to school, she loved to hear the Boston accent, you know the “pahk and Hahvad yahd.” And so, I swear within two weeks, you would think that she had come from Massachusetts herself.

For us Christians, we have understood for a long time, that the imitation of Jesus is probably the best way of demonstrating that we truly do know Jesus, that we truly are rooted in Jesus’ words. His example. In today’s reading, Jesus’ own words, but also in the words of Isaiah, give us stunning words of both comfort and challenge. They portray an image of a God whose kingdom is marked by expansiveness, not by restriction to an exclusive minority. Rather, all peoples will be called to share in the bounty and blessings that come with friendship with God, not just a small chosen people of one race or nation.

I would like to show you then, perhaps, about how one of our great ancestors of our tradition took those words very seriously in her own life. She is one of our saints, Jane Frances de Chantal. She was born in France and if you want to remember her, everytime you think of mustard think of Jane Frances de Chantal. She was born in Dijon, France, the mustard capital of the world, they claim. Jane Frances lived about the time of the great St. Francis de Sales. In fact, their letters to one another are a remarkable combination of letters that speak to both of their struggles of trying to understand what friendship with God is really about, how do they live with that sense of openness to embracing God and God in each other.

I would like to give you three examples from her life that I think are examples for us of what our scriptures are talking about today. The first is that Jane Frances deChantal was extraordinarily extravagant in her generosity to the poor at a time early in her marriage when she and her husband were really struggling financially. Jane Frances took the message of the gospel to feed the hungry literally. She began to welcome people to her front door to offer them soup and bread. Of course, as word got out, within weeks, she found herself daily confronted with long lines of people seeking food to satisfy their hunger. One time, when Jane Frances was distributing this

bread and this soup, both homemade by her, one of her neighbors who was helping her came up and said, "Jane Frances, do you realize what is going on? This line is so long because after people get food, they walk around the back of the house and get in line again." She politely reminded her complaining neighbor with these words, "Who am I to decide when they are properly nourished? What if God turned away from me when I came back to Him again and again with the same request?" Jane Frances saw in the poor and the vulnerable the presence of God, as Jesus did. She saw them as full members of God's household who are to be welcomed and cared for until their needs are met.

A second example from the remarkable life of Jane Frances deChantal: She, like Jesus, believed it was necessary to break away from the religious traditions, the restrictions of policies and structures, in the name of the gospel. After her husband had died and after she had raised four children, Jane Frances heard in her prayer a longing she had not heard before, and that was the word of God inviting her to create a religious community for women, particularly for women to serve women in their needs. When she ended up creating this religious community she did some remarkable things that stunned and "ticked off" a lot of Church authorities. She accepted people into the religious life that had often been rejected from other religious communities when they had applied because, they were told, they were either too old or too sick. The rejection of these women from the other religious communities might be likened to making decisions based on bottom line financials, if you will. The best return on their investment over the long haul, so common today in organizational decision-making. But Jane decided she was going to accept women who were ill, women who were infirm, women who were old. She even accepted a woman at the age of eighty-three, and, remember, that was four hundred years ago, in the sixteen hundreds! She accepted many who were sick and infirm. Her comment to her critics and Church authorities about the sick being unfit to live out their vocation when she accepted them was "What do you want me to do? I happen to like sick people myself, but more importantly, I am a Christian and, like Jesus, I am on their side." Jane Frances deChantal believed that all persons have the right to live out their vocations, their life-callings, whatever they were, no matter their age or infirmity. She saw the sick, the discounted and the elderly as vibrant members of God's household, and we, as a society and a Church, are asked to see them in the same light today.

These examples from Jane Frances' life remind us of the calling that we have to truly be people who wish to know God's ways and wisdom, to imitate what Jesus did. She called to this great openness to embrace all as a martyrdom, but a martyrdom of love, an opening herself to others to discover the presence of God without distinction. This is what I think Jesus is referring to in the troubling passage of the gospel, the image of the narrow gate. While God's love is open to all of us, how few of us truly open ourselves to embrace it, and live that kind of radical openness in offering friendship and love to those the world often disdains or ignores. Jane Frances deChantal had come to live a life of loving the stranger, the neglected, the rejected and the poor seriously.

But she was soon to find out that God had an even deeper challenge for her, the challenge of discipleship of imitating Jesus in His own witness, to love our enemies. At age twenty-eight,

seven years into her beloved marriage with her husband Christoff and with four young children, Jane Frances' husband was killed by a friend in a shooting accident while they were hunting. Now a widow with four children and unable to keep their home, she was forced to live with her father-in-law. He and the staff were absolutely cruel to her. Her father-in-law threatened to disown his own grandchildren if they did not remain with him in his house. As you can imagine, with the death of her husband and her horrible living situation, Jane Frances found herself plunged into months of grief and anger and depression. But, in the silence of her prayer, she heard the voice of God within her to love her enemies. And she vowed and committed herself to living peacefully in the household. She did so by deciding to never return anger with anger, never to return emotional abuse with physical or verbal violence and never badmouth her father-in-law or the housekeeper in front of the kids.

However, even amidst this horrible living situation, she found herself confronted once again in prayer, even when she makes this conversion to love her enemies. This time, she hears the invitation again, but to love her enemies comes in the form of the need to forgive the man who had shot her husband. How could she possibly do that, trying to cope with the grief of losing her husband with four young children, in a terrible living situation? She decided to do so because she was devoted to imitating Jesus, to taking the words of the scripture seriously. And so, she decided and did. She would see him on the street and, even if he were across the street, she would go out and offer a "Good day" 's greeting to him. Several months later, she would invite him to the home, as he had been a long-time friend of her husband, to invite him over for dinner and to visit with the children. Several years later, miracle of miracles, she accepted his offer to be godmother to one of his children. Jane Frances deChantal gives us a remarkable witness of what it means to take the words of the scripture seriously, to imitate Jesus, an example of the radical truth that we proclaim, and that is that all people, all people, are called to be embraced into the extravagant love of God through us as we ourselves welcome their presence into our homes, into our church, into our friendships, into our society. For all people are part of the household of God.

Perhaps if we find this challenge most difficult, if we find ourselves hesitant and afraid to open our arms in such extraordinary ways, we might remember the life of Jane Frances deChantal who opened her heart so extravagantly, remember her life and the words and life of Jesus that we might find hope and courage to remember, through their lives, that nothing is impossible with God.