

# The Age of Reason

# Our Catholic Heritage

## Secular Humanism Conflicts With the Church

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

Ideas have a way of repeating themselves in history. The neopaganism of the Renaissance age resurfaced in the 17th and 18th centuries in a more sophisticated and scientific way. Men began to turn their backs on religion and turn inward toward themselves. Nature and physical laws were the measure of all things.

So pervasive was this new humanism that the Christian churches lost their initiative in influencing men's lives. Those who were irreligious, atheist, agnostic and deist took control of the future of western civilization. Rational secularism became the guiding principle of many lives. Little by little the leading lights of this age pushed revealed religion out of their daily lives.

At first, this new philosophy in the

Age of Reason did not seem hostile to God or His revelation. But soon the proponents of this philosophy began to direct their attacks at revealed religion, especially the Catholic religion, and thus encouraged religious doubt, religious indifferentism, rationalism, atheism, agnosticism, naturalism and base materialism.

The term "Enlightenment" is usually used to refer to the development of this philosophy in France during the years preceding the French Revolution. But the Age of Reason, whose philosophy was that science was the measure of all things, originated in England, passed through France, and was canonized by Immanuel Kant in Germany.

Francis Bacon, Descartes, Newton, and others discovered physical laws which led to the Scientific Revolution. Men began to think that people, like physical nature, are also governed by immutable laws, and all that was necessary was to discover those laws and everyone would be happy. John

Hobbes tried to show that men are machines. John Locke, also in England, tried to apply physical laws to politics. He would deliver men from an absolute king. If Locke could do that, others would try to deliver men from an absolute God. Such ideas led to Deism, which held that God is the first cause of the universe but then left the world to itself to take care of itself in an unchangeable and mechanical order.

The most famous name in the French Enlightenment was Voltaire (d 1778). By his books and plays, his contributions to the French Encyclopedia, of religion, and his merciless satire he managed to popularize the ideas, anti-religious and anti-clerical, of the French philosophes. These men were so obsessed with hatred of the Catholic Church that they portrayed it as an institution whose aims were to propagate superstition, stifle human freedom and con-

trol people's minds. Voltaire's watchword and his signature was "Ecrasex L'Enfame." ("Crush the infamous thing"). He did not succeed. On his deathbed he asked for a priest.

The Age of Reason contributed mightily to the advance of scientific knowledge and to the material betterment of civilization. It helped to update educational methods; abolish slavery; and advance democratic forms of government. But its emphasis on agnosticism, atheism, rationalism, hedonism, and secular humanitarianism conflicted with the revelation of God and the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Unfortunately, at that time, the Church had no organized body of intellectuals to challenge the philosophies of the Age of Reason, nor to accommodate the new discoveries to Revelation. The Society of Jesus had been suppressed in 1773.

## Two Outstanding Leaders of Church Revival

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

St. Francis de Sales (1576-1622) and St. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641) were two of the outstanding leaders of the Catholic revival which took place after the Council of Trent. Like St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clair before them, they were the right pair for the right time. They gave examples of Christian understanding and happiness to a stiff-backed generation.

With her spiritual father, St. Francis de Sales, St. Jane Frances de Chantal founded the Congregation of the Visitation in 1610. Of all the religious orders born after the Council of Trent, this congregation was the most original in its adaptation to the apostolic needs of the age.

The co-founders of the Visitation Sisters intended to combine the secular and the religious state in their constitutions. Their sisters would practice interior spirituality while engaging in active works of charity. But the Holy See amended this plan when it approved the foundation and made it a cloistered order of contemplatives under solemn vows. It was left to St. Vincent de Paul and his Sisters of Charity to carry out the plans of St. Francis and St. Jane.

St. Francis was born in Savoy; St. Jane in Burgundy. St. Francis had studied law before his ordination to the priesthood (1593); St. Jane had little thought of entering the religious life. St. Francis became bishop of Geneva, Switzerland; St. Jane was

married and had four children. St. Francis was making his mark as a preacher, model bishop, convert-maker, and spiritual director of souls; St. Jane



St. Francis de Sales & St. Jane Frances de Chantal (Art by Robert McGovern)

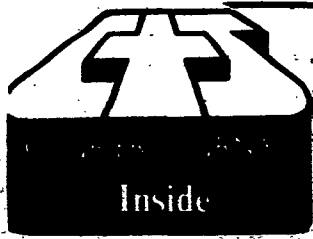
was widowed at the age of 28. They first met when she asked St. Francis to be her spiritual director. They became so engrossed in their apostolic work, with "an affection whiter than snow; purer than the sun," that St. Francis confided to her his idea of founding a new congregation.

St. Vincent de Paul said of St. Jane: "I regard her as one of the holiest souls I have ever met on this earth." In her own humble fashion she was. She became the first superior of the Visitation Sisters, after first providing for her children. By 1636, she was the head of a congregation which had 65 convents throughout Europe.

St. Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva from 1602 to 1622 appears in history as the model of a holy bishop, with his hand always raised in absolution, while radiating poise, peace, compassion and charity. He was also a devout Christian humanist and a spiritual writer of heroic themes. His masterpieces were: "The treatise on the Love of God," "Controversies," "Introduction to the Devout Life" and "Spiritual Conferences."

St. Francis was canonized in 1665. Pope Pius IX named him a Doctor of the Church in 1877; Pius XI honored him as the patron saint of journalists. His feast is observed on Jan. 24.

St. Jane Frances de Chantal outlived him by 19 years. She was finally canonized in 1767. Her feast is observed on Aug. 21.



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