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The COMPLETE

*Madame
Guyon*

*Edited and
translated by
Rev. Nancy C. James, PhD*



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The Complete Madame Guyon

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For my father,

FRANKLIN JOSEPH JAMES

*Who taught me first
how to pray.*

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PREFACE

During the seventeenth-century reign of King Louis XIV, the aristocratic, enigmatic, and spiritually profound Madame de La Mothe Guyon (1648–1717) founded hospitals, successfully argued legal cases, and worked for human rights. At the same time, her prolific writings on spiritual topics would go on to be read by hundreds of thousands of people. Guyon's participation in the court of Louis XIV as well as the widespread publication of her many books made her famous throughout Europe and North America during her own lifetime.

Madame Guyon (as she is known) expressed her profound insights through writing poems, songs, and books. She began to share these compositions with close friends who had similar spiritual interests. In 1685, her friend, whose first name was Giraud (she often kept her friends anonymous for their protection), whom she knew from the parliament at Grenoble, enjoyed her writings on prayer so much that he had them published. This became the small, enormously popular book *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer*.

With the publication of *Short and Easy* and her other books that soon followed, Guyon's ideas began to spread rapidly throughout Europe and to the New World. In this century of intense spiritual fervency, Guyon's method of finding God in the active life without seeking a secluded or monastic existence helped others find answers to deep human problems. Her way of simple prayer also reached into contemplative communities. After this unusual development of a laywoman teaching monks and not the other way around, threatened Church leaders began to ban her books. Her popularity then brought in its wake charges of heresy for Madame Guyon from the influential Jacques Bossuet, the bishop of Meaux, who ministered to many at the royal court and frequently led worship at Versailles. Facing these

charges, Guyon endured a personal inquisition, lengthy interrogations, and nearly a decade of incarceration. Many of these years were spent in the infamous Bastille.

Perhaps these broad strokes of her life will begin to show why her story is so compelling and how her writing gained such a following.

Even through and after these fiery ordeals, Madame Guyon wrote about the joys of her Christian faith and encouraged others to live lives dedicated to God. She survived her inquisition and, following her release from the Bastille, wrote volumes of letters, detailed biblical commentaries, and theological treatises. She welcomed visitors from around the world as she shared her thinking and experiences of the spiritual life.

In my study of religious mysticism at the University of Virginia, I found myself drawn to the life and work of this extraordinary woman. Her distinctive theology shows the spiritual process that leads to union with God. Her ideas still challenge us with her belief in pure love and spiritual annihilation. The deathless fire of pure love, she writes, calls us to sublime marriage with Christ. Her ideas were tested in the crucible of personal suffering. I found within myself a new peace and strength after studying her theology.

I came to think about Madame Guyon and her friend, the influential and also often embattled archbishop François Fénelon (1651–1715), as those who opened a door into a different, and possibly heavenly, world. In this world the traditional boundaries between cleric and lay, male and female were blurred, perhaps even erased. Guyon felt that God had annihilated her own personal will and replaced it with the divine will, and this was the ultimate erasing of boundaries, the blurring of distinctions between creature and Creator.

Her thought and actions offered visions of a world that differed from the social reality in which she lived. In Guyon's understanding, where the meek and lowly were ranked closer to God, where even Louis XIV, so powerful that he gained the title of Sun King, and his wife, Madame de Maintenon, could not claim a privileged place before the divine. Guyon challenged the popular notion that wealth

was a sign of God's favor toward that person; instead, she said that innocent suffering was a gift to be treasured. Guyon opened new ways for people to find God wherever they were and encouraged others not to be spiritually intimidated by difficult social conditions.

Her psychological insights were also profound—and ahead of her time. In Guyon's world, love between individuals is so strong that when one is in need, the other knows it without being in the presence of the person. In her fresh understanding of spiritual possibilities, women can think and dream as powerfully as men. Through living in the divine spirit, a person can make choices for the good of her soul while not conceding to a world threatening bodily harm. While dwelling in the profound depths of the soul, God is known and loved for who God is, unconditionally, while accepting the suffering that comes from this. In Guyon's vision, God becomes one with us and is united to us following the purification of our soul.

Through these writings you will discover—as millions before you have done—that to struggle with Madame Guyon's theology and spiritual ideas is to be enriched. Her words have the ability to instill deep within us the joyful and fulfilling presence of God.

INTRODUCTION

THE LIFE OF MADAME JEANNE GUYON

Jeanne de La Mothe's small hometown of Montargis resided on the Loire River in the midst of imposing royal castles, ancient churches, and productive farms. The lush beauty of the Loire River valley had for generations attracted those with wealth and aristocratic heritage to make this their ancestral home. Also, spirituality exercised a power in this area, as Joan of Arc lived about twenty miles from Jeanne's hometown. Joan's act of saving France from the English invasion was still revered more than two centuries later, and her having heard interior divine words was held in high regard by those dwelling in Jeanne's hometown. This combination of respectful spirituality and stunning nature lived in Jeanne's soul the rest of her life.

Yet even in the midst of this sublime beauty, Jeanne knew suffering and pain from the time of her birth. Jeanne's mother experienced a shock during the pregnancy and gave birth prematurely to a very sick and nearly lifeless daughter. In 1648, the local Roman Catholic priest prayed over Jeanne immediately after this premature birth because she was not expected to live. After an early surgery on her back to release widespread infection, Jeanne survived but suffered from serious and unusual illnesses, including gangrene in both thighs, until she was three. Jeanne considered her surprising survival the action of the mercy of God, who granted her a divinely inspired destiny.

Jeanne was born into an aristocratic family with many privileges. However, her parents—due to their special roles in society—experienced many personal and social conflicts. Throughout their lives, the turmoil of King Louis's court at Versailles influenced Jeanne's life because her parents courageously supported some who had been expelled from the French royal court. In particular, Guyon's parents aided the disgraced Nicolas Fouquet, Louis's minister of finance who was removed from his position, imprisoned in 1665, and remained

there until his death. His daughter, the duchess of Bethune, lived with Guyon's parents in Montargis. Jeanne's family also sheltered others who were dangerously controversial and whose names she did not dare disclose.¹ Seeing her parents take these courageous stands for those in trouble made her respect and internalize a love for justice, even if it involved personal risk and cost.

Both of Jeanne's parents, Claude Bouvier de la Mothe and Jeanne le Maistre de la Maisonfort, had children from first marriages, and they never blended successfully into a unified family. Jeanne described the tensions as occurring primarily between the adult children and their younger stepsiblings. Some of these tensions were caused by the favoritism of the parents for certain children. Some of the familial tensions, though, were initiated by jealousy over the recognition of the nobler heritage of her father. Jeanne's father's lineage included many saints and a long history of aristocratic dignity. Indeed, when Jeanne was eight, the queen consort of England, Henriette Marie de France (1609–1669), came to visit her parents, and at that time she asked to adopt Jeanne to take her back to her royal court, a request which Jeanne's father denied. This respected paternal heritage brought the jealousy of the maternal children. Jeanne experienced the wrath of her older half siblings throughout her entire life.

Widespread poverty and famine among the peasantry also affected Jeanne's family. As a child, Jeanne watched as French peasants begged her parents for food and work. Jeanne witnessed their intense struggle to survive, as well as her parents' generous responses. Jeanne's parents welcomed anyone seeking help and gave away abundant food and money daily. Jeanne describes, for instance, her parents giving large amounts of money to aspiring tradesmen who wished to start businesses in order to support themselves and other workers. After seeing firsthand these difficult situations and the creative ministry her parents developed in response to human need, she became a child aware of the necessity of helping others.

Jeanne's mother (also named Jeanne) worked actively among the poor and in the local Roman Catholic parish. Always busy with a

variety of duties and responsibilities, she kept some of the children close to her and others she sent to board at religious communities. As young as four, Jeanne believed that her mother preferred her younger brother, Guillaume, who was kept at home while Jeanne went away to school. At the age of two-and-a-half, Jeanne was sent to live with the Ursulines, a religious community of nuns. After about a year there, she was returned home for a short while, and then at four her parents boarded her with the Benedictines. Often feeling alone, whether at home or in a religious community, Jeanne was a studious child and read avidly.² A natural solitary, she was not usually cared for by relatives but was instead passed from servant to servant.

In 1655, at the age of six, her father sent the young girl back to live in the Ursuline convent after he found her playing dangerously in the streets without supervision. At this convent, Jeanne was passed between her older sisters, one descended from her mother and the other from her father. Through all of these comings and goings within her large family, Jeanne felt most loved by a paternal sister, Marie de St. Cecile Bouvier, who introduced her to the wonders of personal prayer. Jeanne also wrote of being hit and criticized by an older maternal half sister, whom she does not name.³

At nine, Jeanne returned home again briefly but then was boarded at the Order of St. Dominic at the age of ten. While there, she became ill with smallpox and, because the nuns feared this contagious disease, was left alone. It was during this time that, she says, she fortunately found a Bible. She read it through from cover to cover and retained the ideas and imagery from this powerful first reading of the Scriptures. Jeanne also read the entire works of Francis de Sales, the great preacher, teacher, and author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* who would be canonized by Pope Alexander VII when Jeanne was just sixteen, and Jane de Chantal, the founder of the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, who died just seven years before Jeanne was born. She enjoyed their warm spirits of joyful obedience to God. Their ideas about the happiness that comes from the love of God influenced her for the rest of her life. In imitation of Jane de Chantal, Jeanne made a cloth

decorated with the name of Jesus that she wore next to her skin constantly.

At the age of eleven, her parents brought her back home for a short time. Even then Jeanne's brother frequently tormented her, so her father decided to send her back to the Ursulines for more education and her first Communion. At twelve, her mother brought Jeanne home to begin to introduce her into society and train her in the social graces. She also enjoyed enhancing Jeanne's natural beauty with clothes, new hairstyles, and other ornaments. Jeanne resisted this maternal influence and showed little interest in moving into aristocratic society. Under the influence of her older paternal sister, Marie, Jeanne had become a devoted member of the Roman Catholic Church. At the age of twelve, she applied to take the vows of a nun at the Visitation Order, that same religious community begun by Jane de Chantal. The sisters at the Visitation wanted to accept Jeanne but feared her influential father's anger if they did so, because although he supported her spiritually, he did not wish the life of a nun for this daughter.

Jeanne decided to forge a letter from her mother that agreed to let her become a nun. In 1660 she walked into the nunnery with this letter in hand that allowed her to take the vows of a nun. She later described the scene humorously, for the nun to whom she showed the letter was a personal friend of her mother's and knew that this was not her handwriting. Laughing, they sent Jeanne back home again. Her confessor was informed of this indiscretion, and he informed Jeanne that she was no longer to sneak out of the house and run to the Visitation Convent.

Jeanne waited to reapply when she was older. Meanwhile, she grew into a beautiful girl, and her intelligent personality became well known throughout her community in rural France. Between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, she became more receptive to her mother's encouragement of her vanity over her beauty and she received several proposals of marriage. Her father consistently turned down these proposals, and Jeanne still sheltered the hope that she would be allowed to become a nun.

But an unexpected event would shatter Jeanne's hopes. When she was fifteen, an older, wealthy man, Monsieur Jacques Guyon, wanted to marry her. As the customs of the time dictated, Guyon approached her father and asked for Jeanne's hand in marriage. The wealthy Guyon family had built canals that brought water into Paris and had been richly rewarded by the king for their engineering marvels. On January 28, 1664, without any courtship or even meeting him, Jeanne was forced into a wedding she did not desire. She writes in her *Autobiography*, "They even made me sign the articles of marriage without telling me what they were."⁴ With her parents hastening the preparations, the elegant wedding happened quickly. Jeanne wept through the day with its elaborate banquets. On February 18, 1664, she—not yet even sixteen years old—became Madame Guyon, married to Monsieur Jacques Guyon, Lord of Chesnoy and of Champoulet, a man twenty-two years her senior.

Initially Madame Guyon hoped to create a pleasant home for this marriage. Yet the problems compounded when her mother-in-law decided to live with the mismatched couple. Tensions arose between the two women. Guyon's husband felt torn between his young wife and his demanding mother. Bowing to his mother's wishes, Jacques consistently supported his mother while ignoring the needs of his teenage wife. Monsieur Guyon's mother controlled Jeanne's life, enforcing strict rules on what her daughter-in-law was allowed to do, including limited attendance at church and few social engagements.

Several years passed in the conflicted household. By the time Jeanne was nineteen years old and pregnant with her second child, she suffered from fevers and a sickly pregnancy. Even though she practiced vocal prayers, her life felt monotonous and unhappy. In response to these problems, Jeanne began to spend most of her days in utter quiet, and she fell into a depression. She began to wonder how to live. She didn't know how she could accept the child that she carried, since so much sadness overwhelmed her.

On July 22, 1668, Jeanne went to speak with a visiting Franciscan friar, Father Archange Enguerrand, about her troubles because she

knew she needed help.⁵ The friar listened to Jeanne's story as she poured out her heart. After she finished, he felt moved by this girl's sorrow and gave her counsel that began a whole new existence for Jeanne, including her dry and unhappy prayer life. He said, "It is, Madame, because you seek without what you have within. Accustom yourself to seek God in your heart, and you will find God there." Jeanne felt the presence of God in these words. She described it later, "Those words put into my heart what I was seeking so many years, or rather, they made me discover what was there, and which I did not enjoy for want of knowing it. Oh my Lord, you were in my heart, and you asked from me only a simple turning inward to make me feel your presence!"⁶ No more would she look outside of herself for what she needed: God lived within her. Jeanne now would apply her heart to find God.

So Guyon turned to a plain, small closet in their mansion. She learned to find times of quiet repose in the closet as she took seriously the words of Jesus to go into a closet to pray. She writes, "Prayer is nothing but the affection of the heart and love. To love God and to look at God is absolutely necessary. Saint Paul tells us to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thess. 5:17). Our Lord says, 'I say to you, watch and pray' (Mk. 13:33, 37). All people can and should practice prayer."⁷ She quickly grew to know a spiritual power clustered around her faith. Jeanne went deep inside, found God there, and came back to life with a profound respect for all of its gifts. Her certainty and intelligence surfaced. And her life was soon enveloped by compassion for the suffering of humanity.

Praying in quiet several times a day, Jeanne knew that God moved within her heart even amid the responsibilities of her active household. Between the years 1665 and 1676, she bore five children and actively involved herself in raising each of her sons and daughters.⁸

Jeanne yearned to offer her family stability and happiness, and yet her children were to be affected by the conflicts in their home. Her mother-in-law criticized Jeanne to the oldest son, Armand-Jacques, and sent him to watch his mother in order to report back what she

was doing. Although Jeanne tried to stop her mother-in-law from undermining her authority, this practice unfortunately continued. Because of this, Jeanne became estranged from her oldest son and never again knew a good relationship with him. Jeanne put continual effort into remaining close to her other children and succeeded.

Jeanne continued to seek spiritual growth through regular meetings with a local nun and spiritual director, Mother Genevieve Granger, prioress of the Benedictines. It was Mother Genevieve who told Jeanne on July 22, 1672, the Day of St. Mary Magdalene, to marry the infant Jesus.⁹ Genevieve counseled Jeanne to find a ring, seclude herself in her closet, and put the ring on and commit herself to Jesus. Jeanne followed this advice and took lifelong vows to take the Lord for her spouse, as she acknowledged her unworthiness of this great honor.

As Jeanne followed this popular interior devotion to Jesus, she found her exterior life also transformed; she became increasingly active and dedicated to ministering to any suffering human being. Soon Jeanne would need to apply these new skills in her own personal life. When smallpox raged through their village, the disease killed two of Jeanne's children and left Jeanne herself scarred and weakened. Then, in 1676, when Jeanne was in her late twenties, her husband died, leaving her a young, wealthy, pregnant widow. Soon after her husband's death, Jeanne bore an infant daughter and named her Jeanne-Marie.

Yet Guyon writes that she found no relief in the death of her husband, and she spent days crying as she cared for the newborn infant. She also worked to protect the interests of her children now that she was their sole protector. Many wanted to obtain Jeanne's property and wealth, including both her half brother Father de La Mothe (who was a Barnabite monk) and some Roman Catholic bishops. Instead of following their directives, Guyon put most of her money into trusts for her children, keeping only a small allowance for her needs. She turned down several offers of marriage, again from those most interested in her material possessions, and decided to live alone. She then developed an active ministry caring for the

sick and offering spiritual counsel. Her effective means of preserving her wealth created ill will from those conspiring to take it, while her active, single life broke social norms for women common in that era.

LIFE IN GENEVA

In 1680, in order to continue her spiritual growth, Guyon went under the spiritual direction of a Barnabite brother, Father François La Combe.¹⁰ She both trusted him and enjoyed his friendship. After Father La Combe moved to Geneva, taking a new position primarily as a preacher and spiritual director, in 1681 Guyon also moved there with her young daughter. In Geneva, Bishop Jean d'Aranthon requested that Guyon become a mother superior in an order of nuns called the Nouvelles Catholiques.¹¹ Guyon adamantly refused this idea, saying that her lack of formal religious training and vows made the offer ludicrous. He then asked for financial contributions to this nunnery. Bowing to his request, Guyon contributed some of the money that she had left over.

Instead of becoming a nun, Guyon worked with Father La Combe to plan and begin much-needed hospitals. The pair identified poor communities that had no medical care or facilities. Working long hours, Jeanne even made ointments and medicines for the patients. She energetically contacted religious communities and asked for their help. Approaching the homeless sick, Guyon told them about the new resources. Each of these small hospitals filled up quickly with those in need of their services.

Guyon also began writing widely on how to enjoy intimacy with God and find happiness. It was at this time, between 1681 and early 1685, that she wrote her most famous work, *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer*. Basing her theology on her own experience, she wrote, "The soul that is called to inward silence should not burden itself with vocal prayers. Unless the prayers are an obligation, the soul should engage with interior silence and leave behind the use of any vocal prayers. This way the soul is not obstructed and bound but freely given to the leading of the Holy Spirit. In this way, the soul will satisfy all devotions to a most sublime degree."¹²

In 1685, when her enthusiastic reader and friend from parliament initiated the publication of *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer*, it was only a matter of months before the publication spread throughout Europe. It became wildly popular with contemplative monks and nuns, as well as with people from all manners of life and work. Guyon was asked to write a preface for it, which she did, and the book rapidly went through six printings. One group of monks alone ordered fifteen hundred copies. Readers immediately saw how Jeanne's writing demonstrated a deep understanding of the human soul involved with the struggle of life—unlike most of the spiritual writing in those days, which was mostly penned by priests and bishops who showed less ability to relate to difficult human struggles. She had absorbed the teachings of great mystics and theologians before her and distilled them into a way of speaking to the everyday Frenchman and Frenchwoman. Everyone could benefit from her writings, whether rich or poor, vowed or not. Guyon described young girls forced into child labor who prayed while working, as well as women and men in convents and monasteries who still saw fit to adopt personal, contemplative methods of prayer.

But increased public exposure brought political problems. Guyon had a gift for independent thinking as well as frank honesty and confrontation. For instance, she had steadfastly refused to give all of her money to the Roman Catholic Church, and this didn't escape notice of the Church authorities. And she confronted Bishop d'Aranthon about a priest on his staff who was sexually harassing nuns.¹³ Also, Church authorities began to question Jeanne's orthodoxy. Her books advocated that everyone could and should practice quiet, interior prayer—a controversial notion.¹⁴

In 1685, Bishop d'Aranthon requested that both Guyon and Father La Combe leave his diocese. After submitting to the bishop's request and leaving Geneva, Jeanne and her daughter Jeanne-Marie began a nomadic existence, traveling all over Europe offering spiritual direction and ministering to anyone who needed her help. They visited other parts of Switzerland, as well as Italy and France. At times they met with Father La Combe if they were in the same city.

Continuing to write prolifically, Guyon wrote most of her books during this time, including her commentary on the Song of Songs. As Guyon wrote in a prayer to God during these years, “I say, oh my God, these words have been the delight and the power in my life. . . . You have given me the strong chalice. You have filled my life with good and with crosses.”¹⁵

During her time traveling throughout Europe, Guyon made many close friendships that lasted a lifetime. She considered these relationships one of the great benefits of being part of the Christian community. In one letter, she writes about the unique love between spiritual people. “Be one in God,” she writes to those interested in the spiritual life. She talks of the rewards of communing with God in the presence of other believers. “Blessed service, who gives us freedom. Blessed solitude, you show us the truth! Blessed quietude, I am enchanted by you!”¹⁶ Guyon found sweet union with several friends in her life, with most of these relationships surviving her later difficult times.

ACCUSATIONS OF “QUIETISM”

In 1685, Louis XIV requested that the Vatican condemn as a heretic a popular Spanish priest by the name of Miguel Molinos, accusing him of something called “Quietism.”¹⁷ The quietist supposedly believes that spiritual perfection can be achieved in this world through practicing silent, wordless, “quiet” prayer. This perfection comes through a passive listening for God’s word in the soul—one of the stated goals of many of those who were practicing and teaching contemplative prayer in the late seventeenth century. The work of teachers such as Father Molinos, as well as Madame Guyon, was gaining more and more followers. At times their teachings were believed to advocate the idea that when one receives a divine “word” from God in quiet prayer, the person then knows a type of spiritual purification and enlightenment that is unavailable through the normal course of life—including through the sacraments of the Church alone. Understandably, the Church hierarchy feared this

popular movement that was attracting so many to a spiritual path that did not need the mediation of clergy or bishops. In 1687, the Vatican declared Quietism to be heretical.

In the midst of this controversy, Father de La Mothe, Guyon's half brother, began an active persecution of her that began decades of troubles for Guyon and her friends. He charged that Father La Combe had a secret relationship with Rome that could undermine the authority of the French Roman Catholic leaders.¹⁸ These charges concerned the powerful Bishop Bossuet, who helped lead the Gallican Movement encouraging French isolation from excessive Vatican influence. Father de La Mothe stated that La Combe brought into France ideas of undue submission to the pope, an idea that the Gallican bishops did not accept. He also said that La Combe and his sister had an inappropriate relationship. This unproven charge sent their lives into a tailspin.

At this time of history, the Roman Catholic Church still had the criminal justice power of the Inquisition. To be judged guilty of heresy could lead to lifelong incarceration and death by burning at the stake or hanging. Father La Combe faithfully faced these accusations and provided evidence of his life of integrity. He believed that because he was innocent, he would be exonerated. Yet the Church authorities decided to incarcerate him as they investigated the charges. Beginning on October 3, 1687, Father La Combe began an imprisonment that he endured for the rest of his life.

In January 1688, the authorities arrested Guyon under suspicion of heresy and immorality.¹⁹ The authorities incarcerated her in a small room without windows or ventilation in a nunnery in the House of the Visitation in Paris. No information about her children was allowed to reach her. Guyon was watched day and night as the Church hierarchy sought evidence for any legal charges. During the incarceration, Guyon suffered through lengthy interrogations from Church officials. Over the course of the ensuing weeks and months, Church and state authorities intensified their accusations as they sought to justify the incarcerations of Guyon and La Combe.

Madame Guyon's faith carried her through this difficult time of afflictions. She wrote,

Our miseries are glorious to God. In them we see that only God is holy, just and perfect. They bring us great advantages. We know who we are through this experience of misery. . . . Our vicissitudes are the right fit for us. God pours one into the other and makes all things become even for us. We are not frightened by these changes but are led by both the high places and the low, as it pleases God.²⁰

Responding to her suffering, Guyon's committed friends advocated for her release from this yearlong incarceration. Eventually the third wife of King Louis XIV, Madame de Maintenon, intervened with her husband, which helped lead to Guyon's release.²¹

Finally, in September 1688, the Church declared they could find no evidence of heresy or immorality and Louis XIV sent a *lettre de cachet* ordering Guyon's release from incarceration. Because other state officials had recently ordered Guyon's transfer to an incarceration nearly seven hundred miles from Paris, Guyon barely escaped from a lifelong imprisonment despite this letter. At that time, to be taken away from Paris meant that the person would be beyond help in distant and possibly unknown prisons. Unfortunately Father La Combe had already been sent to a prison farm outside of Paris, where he remained incarcerated until his death in 1715.

Reuniting with her daughter, Guyon resumed her life, hoping that the worst was over. Yet even as she tried to rebuild her life, Bishop d'Aranthon issued a pastoral letter against *Short and Easy*, and on November 29, 1689, the book was placed on the notorious Index of Prohibited Books, meaning that any Catholic caught reading or discussing it was subject to his or her own inquisition. In 1694, Archbishop Harlay of Paris also placed Guyon's biblical commentary on the Song of Songs on the Index.

MEETING FÉNELON

After her release, Guyon and her daughter stayed in the Christian home of Madame de Miramion, where she adjusted and healed after the difficult incarceration. Guyon renewed her friendships as she met to thank her many defenders for their help. In October 1688, she attended a reception along with one of the leading figures from Louis's court, the famous Archbishop François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon.²² The appointed royal tutor at the French court at Versailles, Fénelon spiritually directed many men and women who were close to the king.²³ Their mutual friends arranged this meeting at the intimate soiree and hoped that the venerable archbishop would enjoy the spiritual depth of the famous Madame Guyon. However, at the elegant gathering Fénelon resisted this planned introduction and only reluctantly talked to Guyon. She understood his coldness and felt pained by this. Nevertheless, she continued to reach out to him in a conversation about God, even though she saw his rejection based on her bad reputation as a former prisoner. After this awkward opening conversation, they talked again the next day, and soon these two spiritual leaders developed a warm rapport that lasted a lifetime.

Because of her close friendships with Fénelon and many other aristocrats, Madame Guyon now enjoyed full acceptance by the court at Versailles. Meeting frequently with those interested in spiritual development, Guyon found more opportunities for ministry presenting themselves to her. Louis XIV's wife, Madame de Maintenon, invited her to teach young women how to pray at the school at St. Cyr that educated the daughters of the war-impooverished nobility.²⁴ Praying with Guyon, these female students became more confident that God planned a way for them in their challenging lives. Because these daughters of poor nobility frequently could not make good marriages, at the school at St. Cyr they obtained job skills and hoped to avoid lives of illicit relationships and prostitution. Guyon rapidly became known for her work as the girls learned how to pray internally. She also became active in an invitation-only prayer group called the Court Cenacle, which included Madame de Maintenon and Fénelon, along

with some leading dukes and their wives.²⁵ This group hoped that a purified and faithful France would be obtained through the spiritual growth of the French leadership at Versailles.²⁶

Unfortunately more troubles arose when the bishop of Chartres and St. Cyr, Paul Godet, complained about the students' prayer life at St. Cyr, labeling them with the new heretical buzzword, Quietism. The girls' practice of interior prayer raised concerns that they exercised a faith independent from the Church episcopacy. In 1693, Madame de Maintenon withdrew her support for Guyon and ordered that she no longer teach there.²⁷ Once again Guyon's reputation was damaged, her orthodoxy questioned. Bishop Bossuet and others began again to look for heresy in her still-popular *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer*.

But this time, Archbishop Fénelon came to her aid. He hoped to end the controversy about Madame Guyon's theology and convened a group of bishops, including Bishop Bossuet, to read her books. Called the Issy Conferences, this group met regularly for nearly one year and in 1695 concluded in a final statement that some spiritual experiences, such as that of the suffering Job, could not be understood easily. The Issy Conferences' closing document did not condemn Guyon's theology of interior prayer.²⁸

Although this slowed the controversy over Guyon's writings, it did not end the spreading fear that Guyon's spirituality was a threat to the Roman Catholic Church. Guyon went to live in Bishop Bossuet's diocese and allowed him access to question her. During this time, Bossuet became increasingly hostile to Madame Guyon based on his French Gallican understanding of the Roman Catholic faith. She described one scene with Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet. He entered her room at the nunnery at a time when the nuns were singing a motet in honor of the incarnate Word. He requested that she sign a document stating that she did not believe in the incarnation. As Guyon recounted:

I told him I could not sign falsehoods. He answered that he would make me do it. I answered him that I knew how to suffer

by the grace of God; I knew how to die; but I did not know how to sign falsehoods. He answered that he begged me, and if I did that, he would reestablish my reputation, which they had torn apart; that he would say all the good in the world. I replied that it was for God to take care of my reputation if He approved of it, and for me to sustain my faith at the peril of my life. Seeing he gained nothing, he left.²⁹

Bossuet allowed her to leave his diocese, but another political situation now complicated Guyon's life. In 1695, the archbishop of Paris, François de Harlay, unexpectedly died. Bossuet desired this new appointment from Louis XIV and hoped that Madame de Maintenon would intervene with her husband to advocate for him. Bossuet now thought of his former student Fénelon as his competitor for this position and wanted him destroyed. He thought the easiest way to discredit Fénelon was to attack his friendship with Guyon. At the same time, Madame de Maintenon wanted this friendship ended at least partially based on her jealousy of Fénelon's admiration of and attention to Guyon. So Bossuet requested that Louis XIV again incarcerate the influential Madame Guyon.³⁰ As she contemplated another imprisonment, some of Guyon's friends suggested that she flee from France to England, but Guyon did not want to run from her home country.

On December 27, 1695, after she had hidden in Paris for six months under an assumed name, the police found Guyon and arrested her.³¹ Louis XIV sent Guyon a *lettre de cachet* that stripped her of a right of appeal and sentenced her immediately to prison. Guyon received no formal charges with the *lettre de cachet* as the letter itself officially deprived the prisoner of all legal rights.³²

The authorities took her to the dungeon at the imposing Castle Vincennes, the place of incarceration for religious heretics and freethinkers. After her arrival, the police searched her thoroughly. They discovered among her personal possessions wax images of a baby and a man. Believing these to be witch's paraphernalia, the authorities confronted Guyon. She responded that these were her

prayer statues, the infant Jesus and the archangel Michael.³³ Not believing her protestations, the authorities subjected Guyon to aggressive questioning.³⁴

She would remain in Vincennes for ten months as they searched for proof of crimes, and Gabriel Nicolas de La Reynie, lieutenant-general of police in France, interrogated Jeanne on numerous occasions for eight or ten hours at a stretch.³⁵ Guyon stated that she survived these strenuous experiences by abandoning herself to God and letting the Holy Spirit give her answers. All during this incarceration, Guyon continued her faithful abandonment to God. She described her experience of praising God with another female prisoner while she was at Vincennes: “We used to sing your praise, oh my God! I regarded myself as a little bird you were keeping in a cage for your pleasure, and who ought to sing to fulfill her state of life. The stones of my tower seemed to me rubies: that is to say, I esteemed them more than the magnificence of the century. My joy was grounded on your love, oh my God!”³⁶

The authorities at the Vincennes could not break Jeanne under lengthy interrogations. Insisting on her innocence, she denied heresy, immorality, and witchcraft. After ten months, Police Chief Reynie informed Guyon of her imminent release because he had found her innocent. Yet Church authorities informed her that despite being cleared of the state charges, the Roman Catholic Church would keep her in a private incarceration in a nunnery. Guyon began to weep and begged to stay at the Vincennes. She said that at the next place of incarceration she would not have witnesses to the way she was treated. Despite her pleas, the authorities moved her to an enclosed place at a nunnery in Vaugirard on October 16, 1696.

As it turned out, Guyon’s fears were justified. At the decrepit room in which she was incarcerated, the nun in charge frequently hit her on the chin and face. Guyon described her feelings after the violence, saying, “My only consolation, oh my God, is that you see inside to the bottom of our hearts.”³⁷

It was during this time that Bishop Bossuet asked Archbishop Fénelon to sign a document condemning Guyon as a heretic. Fénelon

knew that if he signed, Guyon could be burned at the stake. Refusing to do as Bossuet requested, Fénelon instead defended Guyon's orthodoxy in 1697 by publishing a book called *The Maxims of the Saints*.³⁸ Bishop Bossuet reacted furiously and advocated that Guyon be killed by fire or by hanging for the crime of witchcraft.³⁹ And for his refusal to condemn Guyon, Louis XIV fired Fénelon from his position as royal tutor and banished him to the northern French town of Cambrai, which was the seat of his diocese. It was there that Fénelon lived for the rest of his life.⁴⁰

Guyon's incarceration that began at the Vaugirard convent stretched out for nearly ten years and saw her held captive, also, at the infamous Bastille, King Louis XIV's prison for political prisoners. She was taken there on June 4, 1698. She endured time in solitary confinement followed by aggressive interrogations from the succeeding chief of police, M. d'Argenson. He frequently threatened her with torture. Many techniques for torture were in fact developed over the centuries in the Bastille's dungeons.⁴¹ Yet even in this desolate place, Guyon asserted her faith in honest prayer. She later wrote about her feelings during this time, "For some months, I could only say these single words, 'My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"⁴² She knew that Jesus also had openly expressed his anguish on the cross.

After its publication in 1697, both King Louis and Archbishop Fénelon asked Pope Innocent XII for a judgment on Fénelon's book, *The Maxims of the Saints*. In Rome a group of cardinals met, argued, and debated for two years while Louis's priest, Father de la Chaise, spread rumors throughout the Vatican about a reputed immoral relationship between Fénelon and Guyon. In 1699 judgment came, with the pope censuring the theology of Fénelon while continuing to praise the great archbishop for his fervor and devotion. The pope boldly stated, "The Archbishop of Cambrai erred through loving God too much; the Bishop Bossuet of Meaux sinned through loving his neighbor too little."⁴³ Upon hearing the pope's judgment, Fénelon, ever faithful to his Church, publicly accepted his censure. So ended at the Vatican what is called the Great Conflict.

FINAL RELEASE

After nearly ten years of Guyon's incarceration, Bishop Bossuet finally decided that she was innocent and signed orders for her release from prison.⁴⁴ Having searched relentlessly through Guyon's life and writings, Bossuet could find no evidence of immorality or of intentional heresy. On March 24, 1703, the authorities released Jeanne at the age of seventy. She had been cleared of all charges and was found guilty of nothing. Sick from the horrific conditions, Guyon was picked up, placed on a litter, and later carried to her daughter's house in Blois.⁴⁵ When asked about how she had endured so much, Guyon talked about her relationship with God. "As for the bad treatment, I feel the need to sacrifice and sanctify this by a profound and holy silence."⁴⁶ She also described her own forgiveness of others. "I forgive those who have been the cause of my sufferings, from the bottom of my heart, whatever they have done against me, having no will to retain so much as the remembrance therefore."⁴⁷

Guyon wrote a letter to Archbishop Fénelon about all that had happened, the controversy they endured, and their prophecies made about a future time of realized spirituality. Guyon graciously wrote the following in reference to Madame de Maintenon's betrayal of herself and Fénelon: "There are some souls that God chooses from the beginning and who are destined to a certain end, but some who stray and deviate through their own fault from the way of the Lord. However, this does not prevent the truth of their vocation and grace." Guyon encouraged Fénelon that their faith was not in vain, saying, "In respect of the time that these things will happen, these words have been impressed on me. We are not granted the knowledge of the time and the moment that God will reserve for His power."⁴⁸ She believed that their spiritual teachings would later grow in influence and continue to help others in need.

In 1705, Madame Guyon lived again in a rural French village, Blois, on the Loire River. During this final stage of life, her ministry flourished beyond any of her expectations. Now popular throughout the world due to her published writings and the controversies surrounding

them, people from all over Europe and the New World came seeking her wisdom and advice. Many from England, in particular, wanted to talk with the famous Madame Guyon who had struggled with the powers of Louis XIV and the court at Versailles. One English aristocrat, Lord Deskford, who was also called Chevalier Ramsay, became her secretary, and a Dutchman, Pierre Poiret, quickly got to work publishing her writings.

Madame Guyon lived fourteen years after her release from the Bastille in 1703. When she died in 1717, her fifth child, Jeanne-Marie, who never knew her father, kept a vigil by her mother's bed. Jeanne believed in having faith no matter the state of one's life circumstances. As she wrote, "Believe, love, and follow God through a total annihilation, with its smallness and nothingness. Do not cling to anything and you will be fine. God alone, God alone, God alone!"⁴⁹