

De Sales Discussions

***God Desires You:
St. Francis de Sales on Living the
Gospel***

By

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De Sales

SPIRITUALITY SERVICES

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General Discussion Guidelines and Hints

A discussion is a group of people engaged in conversation. This is a natural human activity: an interesting, exciting and creative experience. Discussion is a shared pursuit of responsive understanding -- of yourself, others and the material under consideration.

The purpose of a leader is to be a catalyst. He/she is present to help everyone (1) make a thoughtful examination of the meaning of the material to be discussed and the problems it presents, (2) clarify their thinking and feeling about the problems, and (3) decide their individual response. It is not presumed that a leader necessarily knows more about the subject under discussion, but that the person is trained and prepared to lead this discussion and offer this special kind of assistance to the group.

Don't expect pre-packaged or 'right' answers. Neither the leader nor a member of the group will provide a conclusive answer at the end of the discussion. Each of you will try to find personally satisfying answers; your pursuit of answers may continue long after anyone discussion period ends. The discussion provides information and deepened understanding, but the real answers will be your personal response to life and the world.

What Happens Before the Discussion?

Read over the text selection at least once and preferably twice, first for general comprehension and second for attention to specifics. On the second reading, underline words and phrases you consider important, and make notes in the margins of anything you did not understand; questions you would like to ask your group, and examples or applications that occur to you; What important ideas does it convey? How? Do these ideas conflict with other ideas or feelings you have? Are problem situations presented? How would you behave in such situations? Why?

What can I do to participate well in the discussion?

- Be committed and involved in the group.
- Treat others in the group with support and respect, even if you disagree with their views.
- Express support and agreement with others when appropriate.
- Be mindful of your nonverbal communication and behavior when you are not speaking
- Stick to the point.
- Say it in the group (not before or after to a few friends).
- Respect the confidentiality of others' disclosures.
- Make the meetings. It's difficult to re-create the discussion experience for you, and the group suffers from your absence and input when you're not there.

- Stay on the subject. Speak about the text, your reactions and others' responses.
- Speak to the entire group, not just one person.
- Seek your own understanding. Don't accept another's view as your own unless it makes sense to you.
- Be sure you understand what another is saying. This is especially true when you disagree with him or her.

(Adapted from E. W. Flynn and J. F. La Faso, Group Discussion as Learning Process: a Source book. Paulist Press, 1972)

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After you have read each chapter, ask yourself these questions:

- 1) What touched you in that chapter?
- 2) What are the most important points, feelings, truths that you want to hold onto, to incorporate in your own life?
- 3) What affirms what you already believe or experience?
- 4) What in each chapter challenges the ways you experience/look at things?

6) If Vincent de Paul is known for his charity towards the poor, and charity towards the sick was the hallmark of Camillus de Lellis, for what did Francis de Sales become most widely known?

7) Once freed from the temptation to fear being damned or losing paradise, in what does Francis become all the more convinced? How does this shift redefine his notion of predestination?

8) How does Francis de Sales define or describe Pure Love?

9) How do you understand Francis de Sales' notion of being disinterested?

10) What two aspects of Francis de Sales' notion of Pure Love are most worthy of note?

11) How/why is it that Salesian spirituality may be described as optimistic?

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Chapter 2: The Human Heart

1) Why are human beings good?

2) What does Francis de Sales mean when he says that there is a correspondence between God and the human person?

3) While God is responsible for all the beauty and goodness in the universe, what especially strikes him? Why?

4) What is a recurring motif in the writings of Francis de Sales?

5) What is our universal call to holiness?

6) When do we most realize the image of God within us?

7) Why is it important to recall the presence of God?

8) What is the supreme point of the soul? How do you reach it?

9) Only who is made in the image and likeness of God? What is the paradox of this recognized by Francis de Sales?

10) Notwithstanding his acknowledgement of God's generosity, about what issue is Francis de Sales decidedly a realist?

11) In describing our prodigal hearts, what are the two portions of the soul or heart identified by Francis de Sales?

12) Whom does Francis de Sales recognize as the one who clearly understands the struggle within our own wills? How does that person describe it?

13) What roles do sin and grace play in our attempts to grow in union with God?

14) Is the desire for good, for love, for union with God a useless desire? Why or why not?

15) For Francis de Sales, toward what is the will attracted? Why is this important?

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Chapter 3: The Heart of God

1) Why is God's heart restless?

2) In the opinion of Francis de Sales, where do we find the vestiges of God? How is this related to the originality of Salesian theology?

- 3) Why is it important that Francis de Sales talks about creation as a dynamic reality?
- 4) Name one of the theological conclusions that we can draw from the Salesian notion of creation? Why is this important?
- 5) How is the image of the Creator-Provider distinct in Salesian thought? How does Francis understand or describe it?
- 6) What is the most perfect manner in which God chooses to communicate divine love? How does Francis de Sales describe the nature of this love?
- 7) What distinction does Francis de Sales draw between God's love and our love?
- 8) Describe the notion of natural providence. Why is this important to understand?

9) What is the cornerstone of the whole cosmos?

10) Why – for Francis de sales – does the Incarnation have theological priority over Creation? Why is this understanding a critical aspect of Salesian spirituality?

11) Through the Incarnation, what does Jesus come to accomplish??

12) How does Francis de Sales attempt to symbolize the entry of Christ into the human heart?

13] What is the basis of Francis de sales' mystical Christocentrism?

14] Which Jesus captures the essence of the Salesian understanding of God's love in Jesus? What are its hallmarks?

15) In the opinion of Francis de sales, what is the perfect manifestation of meekness and humility? How is this described? What are their effects?

16] Why does Francis de Sales use words like stripped, tearing off and taking off when describing God's love and its effects?

17] What is the only motive for the passion and death of Jesus? What image does Francis de sales use to describe this?

18] Where does Francis tell us to look for a glimpse of an abyss of beauty?

19] Through what prism may we catch a glimpse of God's excessive love for us?

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Chapter 4: Prayer – Heart Speaks to heart

1) What did the previous chapter make obvious?

2) How is the union of hearts between God and humankind consistently symbolized in the Treatise?

3) What is prayer? How does Francis de Sales describe it?

4) What is the first thing to understand about prayer when we begin to understand the movement of love within God?

5) What is the scent of the divine beloved? Why is this important to understand?

6) What is the fable of the Apodes? Why/how does Francis use it?

7] What is more aroused in God by our sinfulness? How is this manifested?

8] According to Francis de Sales, what kind of gift is our creation?

9] In the mind of Francis, how was it that the early Christians could be described as having but one heart?

10] How are we to understand the sacraments in the context of prayer?

11] How does Francis de Sales make use of the image of Jacob's ladder?

12] In its essence, what is prayer? From what does it strip or separate from us?

13] What are the four degrees of prayer, closely following the outline of St. Teresa?

14] How does Francis employ the image of bees when describing a form of prayer?

15] In addition to the importance of prayer, what other activity does Francis de sales also emphasize? What is the connection? Why is this important?

8] In the context of this section of the chapter, what can we say is the essence of Salesian spirituality? How must the work of restoring our image in Christ be accomplished?

9] Why does love need gentleness?

10] What two things can each of us find in abundance within ourselves? Why is this important to remember?

11) What two extremes does Francis de Sales appear committed to avoiding? Why is this important to him and, by extension, to us?

12] What are four practical considerations that Salesian spirituality offers in relation to humility?

13) How would you describe to another person Francis de Sales' notion of descending charity?

14] What is the interplay between Creation and Incarnation? Why is the relationship between the two critical to appreciate?

15] How does the humility of Jesus reveal itself?

16] To what virtue do gentleness and humility lead? How would you describe this virtue?

7. What does the sovereign majesty of God provoke? How does Francis de Sales distinguish it from a normal understanding of the same word or concept?

8) How does Francis de Sales distinguish between the two ways of conforming to the will of God?

9] How does Francis de Sales describe maternal love?

10] Read the image employed by Francis de Sales found on page 76. What does an analysis of this quotation reveal?

11] What does the image of a child resting in its mother's arms express?

12] What is perhaps one of the most revolutionary aspects of St. Francis de Sales' Treatise?

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Chapter 7: Trust and Confidence in God

1) Why should we trust in God? What makes that possible? Why is it of utmost importance to establish this?

2) What is it that makes abandon possible? Why does Francis de Sales go to great lengths to repeat this?

3) What attitude must we assume before God? What makes this possible?

4) What is the sign that our attempts at practicing abandonment are authentic?

5) What is impossible without humility?

6) What is the contradiction with which we come face-to-face when we consider surrender to be an act of love?

7] How does the maxim “Ask for nothing, refuse nothing” relate to human freedom?

8] What does this maxim challenge us to do?

9] What kind of stance does this maxim demand?

10] How might someone view this maxim as absolute madness?

11] How can the practice of this maxim serve as an antidote to anxiety?

12] In what way is this maxim not limited to a relationship between me and God?

13] What three points do we need to keep in mind in order to understand the true meaning of this Salesian maxim?

14] What image does Francis de sales use to describe a communion of hearts?

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Chapter 8: Seeking the Will of God

1) What term appears to receive scant attention in contemporary society? Why does the author suppose that may be?

2] The term will of God has a history. How does the author summarize this?

3] What is also very much related to our understanding of the will of God?

4] What two freedoms do we need to recognize when we speak about the will of God?

5] In the Salesian tradition, how can it be said that small actions have as much value as heroic ones?

6] What are three chief tenets that we need to grasp in order to accurately discern the voice of God in our lives?

7) What does the author mean when he writes that Francis de Sales calls us back to a spirituality of the real?

8) What does the author claim is the real art of the spiritual life? What examples does Francis de Sales offer to make this point?

9) How does an authentic spiritual life serve to enrich each person's unique vocation?

10) What two temptations can get in the way of our attempts to live in the present moment?

11) What impact does anxiety have on us? What is the only real way to escape it?

12) What is an additional manner in which we may be tempted to refuse to remain in the present and, therefore, miss out on God's will for us?

13) What does the author make of the old adage, if you have yourself as Master, then you have a fool for a disciple?

14] How did Francis de Sales attempt to deal with the situation in which Jane de Chantal found herself following her husband's death?

15] What are the two wills of God? How would you describe them to someone else?

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Chapter 9: Doing the Will of God

1) How would you paraphrase the selection taken from Luke 6: 45? How does this relate to doing the will of God?

2) What role do our actions play in the spiritual life?

3) From a Salesian perspective, what do we see when we look at the life of Jesus?

4) What is self-evident when it comes to a Salesian understanding of God's will?

5) What can we clearly see in the life of St. Francis de Sales? To what do his actions give witness?

6) How did Francis de Sales deal with injustice and exploitation?

7] What abuses among the clergy did Francis de Sales attempt to eradicate?

8] How did St. John Bosco embody many of the qualities lived and taught by Francis de Sales?

9] The ecstasy of action is made up of what two kinds of live? What Salesian dictum encapsulates this teaching?

10] How does the author describe Salesian mysticism?

11] Please list the affective and effective facets of love.

12] For Francis de sales, in what is the apostolate rooted? Why?

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Chapter 10: Joy and Optimism

1] What is the Salesian notion of happiness?

2] In what ways are pleasure and joy both related, but different?

3] How is friendship with God important for traveling the road to sanctity?

4] In what do we find the source of hope and joy?

5] How do you understand Francis de Sales' image of a fire covered with ashes? What point is he trying to meet?

6] In what do we find the source of our optimism?

7] What two aspects of providential care are present in Francis de sales' use of the image of Jacob's ladder?

8] Why does Francis de Sales find an excellent picture of the devout life in the image of Jacob's ladder?

9] In the Salesian tradition, what is the relationship between sadness and joy?

10] What are the three causes of worldly sadness? How do they impact us?

11] In addition to trying to prevent people from being overwhelmed by sadness, what is also of importance for Francis de Sales? How did he feel about melancholic spirituality?

12) What threat does anxiety present?

13] How was Francis de Sales able to lead people to a state of tranquility and encouragement?

14] Among the fruits of the Holy Spirit, what virtue holds the very next place to charity?

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Chapter 11: Friendship in Salesian Spirituality

1) How do the words taken from the Book of Ecclesiasticus relate to your own experience of friends/friendship?

2) In what might we experience the genius of Salesian spirituality?

3) In the Salesian tradition, why is friendship absolutely necessary?

4) What is essential in the friendship between the Father and the Son? How is this related to the Holy Spirit?

5) How might it be said that the children of God are bound and united together?

6) How is it that Francis de Sales' sees the Holy Spirit as the author of spiritual friendships?

7] What are some of the qualities of spiritual friendship cited in the New Testament?

8) In addition to being our helper and guide, what other role does the Spirit serve for us?

9] What do you have to have in order for true and genuine friendship to exist?

10] What kind of friendships does Francis de Sales warn us against? How does he describe them?

11) What qualities in the spiritual friendship between Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal jump out at you?

12] What was one of the original aspects of the religious congregation founded by Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal? What impact did this have on the name eventually chosen for this new community?

13] The author states that friendship is meant to last forever. How does he explain or describe that?

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Chapter 12: Mary, Model for the Spiritual Life

1] How does Francis de Sales describe the communion that exists between Mary and her son Jesus?

2] In the opinion of Francis de Sales, why is Mary created? In light of this, what does he encourage? What caution does he offer?

3] What is Mary's unique place in the plan of God? What does she teach us about our own spiritual journey?

4] What is the Salesian understanding of the words of Mary's Magnificat?

5] What fundamental truth does Mary recognize about human nature?

6] What is required in true emptiness found among the anawim to which Mary belongs?

7] What is required – as in the case of Mary – to become a true disciple of Christ?

8] How is childlike simplicity manifested?

9] How does Francis de Sales describe/image the indifferent heart?

10] What imagery from the sea does Francis de Sales employ to describe what it looks like to be focused on God?

11] How (in the opinion of Francis de Sales) does Mary encourage us to turn to God in the midst of trials?

12] As mother, how does Mary co-operate with the salvific plan of God?

13] How can we describe Mary as fruitful?

Evaluation
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1. In broad strokes, my experience of this discussion program was

Poor 2 Good 4 Excellent

2. What I learned during this discussion series was...

Not useful 2 Useful 4 Very Useful

3. During this discussion program, I really liked...

4. I would have enjoyed the discussion program more if...

5. Would you like to see a program like this to continue? If so, what Salesian topics or works would you like to explore?

6. Would you suggest any changes to the time, duration, and frequency of the discussion group?

Your Name _____ Date _____

Name of Parish/School/Ministry _____