



# De Sales Discussions

## *Season's of a Family's Life: Cultivating the Contemplative Spirit at Home*

by

Wendy M. Wright



# De Sales

SPIRITUALITY SERVICES

"practical paths to holiness"

[www.oblates.org/dss](http://www.oblates.org/dss)

[dss@oblates.org](mailto:dss@oblates.org)

## **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?

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**Chapter 1**

1) Have you ever thought of yourself as having a vocation or a calling? Has parenthood or marriage ever seemed to be a “call” to respond more generously to the mystery and great questions of life?

2) Pay attention to the silence that underlies your busy and full family life. You might get up early on a Saturday morning before everyone is up and sit by the window with a cup of coffee or tea. Turn off the TV one spring evening and take a quiet walk in your neighborhood. Watch your children sleep. Step outside your back door some night and focus on the stars in the sky. Watch the sun rise or set. Look closely at the moon. Smell the air before a thunderstorm, after a snowfall, during the spring, in the midst of autumn...What do you experience around you? What do you experience inside yourself?

3) Being a person of faith does not necessarily mean being a person who has all the answers. How has raising children or nurturing a marriage invited you, willingly or not, into "living into the question"?

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**Chapter 2**

1) Keep a log or journal for one week. At the end of each day, record the ordinary moments that occurred earlier in the day that connected you to the depth, width, height and length of love.

2) "Desert places" are often places of encounter with our demons as well as with God. To what desert places are you led as a parent or spouse? What temptations do you experience or find there? What do you learn about yourself?

3) Each day this week, spend time with a Scripture passage that reminds you that you are a beloved child of God. Suggestions: Psalms 23, 131, 139; John 3:16, 1 John 3:1-2; Romans 8: 14-17. What impact does such a practice have upon you?

4) How do you make discernments or decisions in your family? Is the “sense of spirit” or prayer a guiding principle? If not, how might it become at least a part of that process?

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**Chapter 3**

1) Take some time together as a family. What are the specific “sacred spaces” in your experience where you sense the “more” of your life together? What happens in those spaces? Do you have specific rituals that occur there? How do you feel when you inhabit or remember these sacred spots?

2) How does living with others in family teach you about God or about the ways that God might love?

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**Chapter 4**

1) Our stories point to the values we celebrate together. How does that story reflect the values that your family shares?

2) Spend time together going through old photo albums, either those of your immediate or your extended family. What or how do they speak to you? What do they say about where you've been? Where you are? Where you're going?

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**Chapter 5**

1) What are the various unnecessary demands that claim your attention and prevent you from being more available or present to your family members? How might you make these things less of a drag or difficulty for you as it relates to your family or friends?

2) Picture in your mind several family “snapshots” moments that invited you to take the risk to genuinely love another person. What might they be? Why/how are they significant to you?

3) How do you or might you and your family consciously honor Sabbath times of rest, relaxation and rejuvenation?

4) How has this “fleshy, finite world” been a privileged place of encounter with God for you?

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**Chapter 6**

1) What places do you call home? Why? How?

2) How has the natural environment in which you live shaped your sense of the holy?

3) Take a long, leisurely walk in your neighborhood. Pay attention to both the “habitude” and the “habitat” in which you dwell. Savor it. Reflect: how you have been shaped by the neighborhood’s people and ethos, as well as by the weather, terrain and landscape?

4) Keep a year-long journal or log of the various flowers, trees and plants that you discover in your neighborhood walks. What kind – if any – impact do they have upon you?

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**Chapter 7**

1) What rituals from your faith tradition have shaped your family's life? How have these rituals helped to create a sense of identity or community?

2) What are the unique rituals that your family practices – those patterned behaviors that make you who you are? Food rituals? Holiday rituals? Vacation rituals?

3) What are the “sacred sites” to which your family members feel drawn or attracted? How has the sense of the sacred or special there developed over time?

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**Chapter 8**

1) If welcoming and letting go are the twin arts of family spirituality, how have you practiced them in the past? How might you need to practice them now? In the future?

2) Write the names of each of your children and grandchildren. Next to each name, name the way(s) that that child has "formed" you. What do you learn about yourself, your gifts, your liabilities? How have each of these children helped love to grow in you?

3) What “new grace” is available to you today?

4) Has parenting or family life ushered you into any experience you might term a “dark night”? How were you, or might you, be “repatterned” in the darkness?

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**Chapter 9**

1) Have a family meeting to consider the ways in which you live, or might live, the countercultural arts of the Christian life. What concrete ideas or suggestions do you anticipate might surface during such a conversation?

2) The struggle to meet the often-conflicting demands of social conscience and family responsibility are very real. Recall times when you feel you have successfully achieved this balance. When have you felt an imbalance? How might you find or make greater balance?

3) Each day for two weeks, pray with one of the traditional spiritual and corporal works of mercy. At the end of two weeks, observe which of your reflections resurfaces. Pray for another two weeks with the work of mercy that might be realized in your family or by your family. How do you think this effort would impact on you? How might it impact on how you interact with others?

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**Chapter 10**

1) Practice disarming gestures – the family hug, the listening ear – with members of your family? How does such a proposition make you feel? How might actually doing these things make you – or others – feel?

2) Are you bound by the inability to forgive? Are you holding another person bound? How might you unbind yourself? How might you unbind another? How might you need help to make this happen?

3) Reconciliation requires that we first experience ourselves as treasured and cherished; only then can we see each other through eyes of love. Has there been a time when you experienced yourself as treasured or cherished by God or another? Are there ways in which you need to be treasured or cherished by God or another now? What might be some obstacles to your knowing that experience?

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**Chapter 11**

1) How have the layers of meaning inherent in each liturgical season (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ordinary time) built up over the years as your family has grown?

2) Call to mind and heart your children and parents. Practice holding your hands shut tight; then, open them. What is it that you find yourself holding onto? What new gifts might fill your open hands?

3) Keep a family scrapbook. How might it help you to pray? How might it help you to be grateful? How might such memories help you to change/grow into the future?

4) In what ways do you experience the simple truth that “God meets me here”?

5) Draw a picture, choreograph a dance, or compose a poem of the patterns of your family that both express and give substance to its shared life. What would like look, feel or sound like?

6) Do your holidays have a “shadow side”? How might you move more deeply into that shadow to consider beams of light that might be there?

7) Tell a story of a family – your own or another – that shows how hope emerged from, loss tragedy or despair? What story comes to your mind? Why that story? How does it affect you?

8) What gifts of spiritual tears” have you discovered or experienced in family life?

9) Take a walk in a garden, either your own or a public one. In what ways is your faith evoked, shaped by or linked to gardens? Are there other things that seem to do a better job of putting you in touch with the deeper places in your heart, mind or gut?

10) Reflect on the truth that it is only a deep, radical trust in God that enables us to let go? How does this feel to you? What would such a trust look like to you? What might help you to develop such a trust?

**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 \_\_\_\_\_