

Francis de Sales: A Contemporary Guide For the Lay Faithful

ONE OF THE MOST PROMISING developments in contemporary religious life is the concerted effort on the part of religious communities to share their spiritual heritage with the lay faithful. Just as apostolic religious communities helped generations of the disadvantaged to assume their rightful place in society, they are now assisting the current generation of lay faithful to assume their rightful place as religious leaders in our society. They are helping the lay faithful respond to the clarion call of the Second Vatican Council to be leaven in the world.

Three hundred fifty-four years before the Second Vatican Council, St. Francis de Sales was absorbed with the universal call to holiness. He devoted much of his life and writings in assisting the lay faithful to fulfill their mission in the church. Today, Salesian spirituality continues to play a vital role in assisting the lay faithful to claim their proper place in church and society. Religious orders, congregations, and lay institutes dedicated to the spirit of St. Francis de Sales are engaged in disseminating Salesian spirituality. Its broad appeal is evident among people of different ideologies and ecclesiologies. Why is Salesian spirituality attractive to the contemporary age?

We live in a culture of violence, characterized by hopelessness, passing relationships, temporary gratification, expedient solutions to difficult problems, and shallow answers to deep questions. In this morass, the

wisdom of de Sales becomes a beacon for those in search of God. I will suggest three ways in which the wisdom of de Sales addresses the spiritual vacuum of our age:

- In a culture of death where there is disregard for the unborn, aging, and disadvantaged, Salesian spirituality offers an optimistic worldview rooted in the dignity of the human person.
- In a world that craves meaningful relationships and nurtures too few, Salesian spirituality provides practical and accessible ways to address the deepest longings of the human heart.
- In a world of expedient and shallow responses to life's questions and problems, Salesian spirituality provides the wisdom and sustenance needed for daily living.

1. Salesian Spirituality Is Rooted in an Optimistic Worldview

Salesian optimism is rooted in de Sales' basic assumptions concerning creation and the purpose of human existence. Salesian spirituality has a deep appreciation for the innate dignity of the human person. It takes seriously Genesis's assertion that we are made in the image and likeness of God. We are born with a natural inclination toward God, which was wounded but not destroyed by the fall. That inclination, fueled by God's transforming grace, creates the possibility of our restoration. We can be restored to our original integrity by cooperating with grace.

God reaches out to us in love. We in turn, with the help of God's grace, are able to accept that love and be transformed by it. In the course of time "Love makes lovers equal." [1] We become like the one loved, and we are able to love as we are loved. Love is the critical task, indeed the essence of life. Devotion nourishes our relationship with God, the object of our deepest inclination. Eucharist, retreats, spiritual reading, prayer, attentiveness to the will of God, and contemplating Christ help us grow in this relationship with God. Through this love relationship, we are predisposed to respond to God's plan when it is spoken in our hearts. All of Salesian spirituality is rooted in what God does in and through us. God,

who is love, is our origin, purpose, and destiny. With such wonderful roots, incredible purpose, and profound destiny-all in the context of God's overwhelming love for us-how could we be anything but optimistic?

2. Salesian Spirituality Provides Practical and Accessible Ways to Address the Deepest Longing of the Human Heart

We long for security. We seek an environment of love where we can be ourselves and where we can find the help and support to be: all God is calling us to be. The deepest longing of the human heart is union with one another and ultimately with God.

Spiritual Friendship

Salesian spirituality is fundamentally relational. In a world that craves meaningful relationships and seems to nurture too few, Salesian spirituality points the way. Francis de Sales invites us into a rich relational world. We come to live like Jesus in the "nitty-gritty" of human relationships. "Living Jesus" happens in what goes on between people. We are called to have a gentle, generous spirit in dealing with everyone. Hopefully, we have strong affectionate ties with parents, children, relatives, and neighbors. But also, it is important that we choose friends. De Sales encourages special relationships. He wants us to have spiritual friends who will help us to journey safely upon the rugged and slippery paths of life. [2]

Spiritual friendship is not an end in itself. It is the union of two or more people anchored in the love of God. These are not codependent relationships, born out of need and characterized by possessiveness and the abuse that results from unfilled expectations. These are interdependent friendships, born out of abundance. Such friendships require maturity and experience. They are characterized by mutuality, reciprocal affection, and heartfelt communication. [3] Friends are courteous and amiable in their dealings with one another, and they share their work, their goods, their affection, and their virtue. They speak of their efforts to lead a devout life.

They are direct and honest with one another in a caring way. They lift up one another's gifts and talents so those gifts and talents may grow under the brilliant sunlight of affirmation. They encourage one another to use those gifts and talents in the service of others. They challenge one another to be all God is calling them to be. True friends have a focused love that simply wills the good of the other. [4]

Furthermore, true friends don't waste time talking about the imperfections of others. They don't interpret the actions of others in the worst possible light. Simply put, true friends don't gossip about others. They don't exploit their faults and failings no matter how real. Rather, they share compassion for others, and they pray for them. [5]

By contrast, de Sales cautions us against manipulative relationships that leave us with impaired judgment or leave us prone to rationalization. Relationships that are characterized by shared sin, sadness, jealousy, and complaining are not worthy to be called friendships. [6] De Sales knows how important it is for us to en flesh the love of God for one another. We are body-spirits. We need the tangible love and affection of each other. He tells us to choose wisely because we become what we love. Then he encourages us to cherish those chosen. [7]

Think of the possible implications of de Sales' teaching on spiritual friendship for our choices in marriage and for the choice of solid friends who will last a lifetime. Imagine valuing mutuality, reciprocal affection, and deep communication ahead of looks, status, and profession. Think of the implications for religious education and marriage preparation courses, places where we need to share with our young people the value of true friendship. Consider the implications that the practice of Salesian spirituality has for family life. De Sales says that devotion should lead families to be more attentive to if the well-being of the members, more gentle in handling situations that arise, more kind in correcting children, more warm and affectionate toward spouses and children, more deliberately concerned about cultivating a spirit of devotion in the

children, and more supportive to the extended family of relatives and friends. [8]

Our Relationship with God

What is at the heart of this spirituality is the heart. Indeed, it is the gentle, humble heart of Christ. De Sales knew that to be all God was calling us to be demanded a way of life that had to be motivated by intense and all-consuming love. Central to his system and method is leading us to that place where God already beckons us to the intimacy of friendship: "I no longer call you slaves but friends." [9] We deepen our relationship with God through prayer and through directing our intentions and uniting our wills to the will of God.

- *Prayer*

How does God beckon? God beckons through one another and within our interior space. However, our ability to listen is conditioned on many variables: from the external noise that seems to surround us everywhere to the internal anxieties and fears about self, family, and job that immobilize us. Where is the space to listen? Within -- and despite all these distractions, many of us have heard God speak or at least been suspicious that God has spoken to us. God speaks in the depths of our minds and hearts.

In guiding souls, de Sales did a lot of listening. It was never his intention to tell his directees what to do. Rather, it was his intention to listen with them to the inevitable, but sometimes painfully tardy, voice of God. He knew that one draws close to God by being attentive to his presence and by doing God's will, and he shows us how to do this. De Sales wants us to fall deeply in love with the Savior. He wants this love to be all consuming.

To this end he encourages imaging. Imagination plays an extremely important role in Salesian spirituality because it is through imaging that de

Sales engages the whole person with the living, breathing Christ. He helped his directees image God's presence in a way that finally brought the presence of their Risen Lord to life in them.

De Sales wants us to be conscious of the images of Christ that we find in Scripture, liturgy, and devotional reading:

Jesus in the garden experiencing dryness, temptation, and doubt; Jesus on Mount Tabor in all his glory; Jesus comforted in the home of Martha and Mary; Jesus discouraged on the dust-covered roads of unheard parables and forgotten miracles; Jesus surrounded by little children; Jesus hanging on the cross, the sign of contradiction for all time.

De Sales invites us to enter into these images, not just with our heads but with our hearts and souls as well. He invites us into the emotion of the moment where we, like Mary and John and Mary Magdalene, can embrace this man who loves us. He wants us to feel Jesus' overwhelming love for us. [10] He wants us to surrender our whole person-mind, heart, senses, and soul to the embrace of the Lord. Thus he encourages us to enter into the Gospel narratives as participants. As we experience the Gospel narratives, we open ourselves to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. De Sales invites us to gather up those inspirations like a bouquet of flowers and take them with us so we can delight in them throughout the day. He also encourages us to make a specific resolution at the end of prayer so that our reflection can lead to transforming action. [11] For de Sales, prayer is the environment in which we allow ourselves to touch and be touched by God. [12]

- *Directing Our Intentions*

De Sales knows that one grows close to God by being attentive to God's presence. So de Sales invites us to withdraw with Christ frequently throughout the day. At the beginning of each new action, we are to remind ourselves of the presence of God, offering all the good we will do and

accepting all the pain and trouble that might present itself. Through this offering, our actions become a prayer, and our actions have eternal significance. This practice is called the Direction of Intention. [13] Our actions, performed with intention, transform us and bring us into closer union with God.

- *Uniting Our Will to the Will of God*

As we attend to his presence, God makes his will known to us in many ways. De Sales starts with what is clear: the commandments and the duties of one's state in life. These responsibilities require action. De Sales knew the redemptive power of action. As we do these things for the love of God, our actions literally transform us and bring us closer to God. So often he reminds those he directs that devotion does not get in the way of household responsibilities, the need to make a living, or the time and affection we should give to our spouse and family. No, devotion leads us to do all of the above with a deeper sense of purpose and greater fervor.

However, there are times when the will of God seems less clear: trials, dryness, doubt, illness, chronic conditions, the death of those we love, and the necessary losses that life inevitably brings. There are also the little reversals, minor inconveniences, and annoying distractions that are part of everyday living. These painful moments can become salvific through acts of acceptance. Again, de Sales invites us to the practice of the Direction of Intention. We offer everything to God and accept the pain and suffering we meet therein. Acceptance is possible as we become more deeply aware of God's abiding presence. God never leaves us as orphans.

Another way de Sales invites us to unite our will to the will of God is through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy that we do as our circumstances allow. Finally, we seek God's will in the significant decisions of our lives. This calls for prayerful discernment and wise counsel. [14] In each of the above situations, our focus is to unite our will to the will of God. As a result, our union with God becomes closer and deeper.

3. Salesian Spirituality Provides the Wisdom and Sustenance Needed for Daily living

Salesian spirituality offers a wealth of wisdom for daily living. One could spend a lifetime exploring the insights of de Sales. I will offer three examples of where Salesian spirituality speaks eloquently and usefully to two contemporary problems and one contemporary need: anger, worry, and a spirit of detachment.

Anger

Let us begin with the anatomy of anger. I offer a personal experience. On a visit to my mother, I arrived exhausted, and mom had an unusual number of things that needed to be done. By lunch the following day, I had accomplished the "to do" list, and it was time to find some quiet space for myself. No surprise to anyone who knows me well, I could not find the car keys. I searched frantically. Now comes the flash point which is that moment between letting go of my anger or venting it.

I'm feeling angry, I want to go, and no keys. What to do? I beg for God and St. Anthony to deliver me at once, still no keys. I decide to calm down by flossing my teeth and gargling with mouthwash. I open the bottle and the cap goes down the drainpipe. I can't get it out. Of course it's my mother's fault because she removed the metal stopper that would prevent such things from happening. Again, I reach another flash point, but this time I'm slamming doors, lecturing my mother on never removing the stopper, and enjoying silent and not so silent rage. In fact, I'm irrational. Passion, not reason, is in charge. Why? A bottle cap and a set of keys!

What does de Sales tell us to do about the flash point -- that moment when we are wrestling with ourselves to let go of the angry feelings welling up inside us? Believe it or not, he says we have a choice. We can decide to vent our anger or not to entertain it. We can turn away, turn to God, and turn to something else. De Sales says we need to let go as soon as possible, for if we begin to entertain it, anger is going to take over very

quickly and reign in our hearts. [15] Once that happens, it becomes harder to let go, and we might hold on for hours, days, weeks, months, or, tragically, years. When we feel anger welling up inside us, we need to ask for God's help and divert our attention from the source of our anger by engaging in some other activity.

What is the best remedy when anger has had its way with us? First, we need to apologize to the person or persons we have offended: "Fresh wounds are quickest healed." [16] We should avoid beating ourselves. The worst thing we can do is to be angry about being angry. Rather than being angry with ourselves, we need to turn that energy into repentance that includes asking for God's forgiveness and help in setting a course of action for amending our ways. [17]

De Sales gives us a course of action for amending our ways. His advice is especially relevant in our culture of violence. In times of interior peace, we need to cultivate a spirit of gentleness. Gentleness is reflected in a kind and amiable external demeanor, but it has its roots in the interior ordering of a person's heart. There is a depth to this external demeanor that is the fruit of a focused and well-ordered life. So when we are not focused or well ordered within because of distractions, a lack of trust, or sin, we become edgy, irritable, and even arrogant. Our external demeanor of gentleness can give way to harshness or arrogance at the slightest word of peaceful contradiction or insult. Therefore, we need to discipline ourselves to be focused on God, with our origins, purpose, and destiny in the forefront of our consciousness.

We can store up gentleness by making a conscious choice to deal with others in a calm, gentle, and compassionate way. In difficult situations, such as disagreements or when we need to correct someone in our care such as our children, we are to be clear, gentle, and peaceful, rather than engaging in angry or passionate appeals. Friends never heal wounds or solve problems by shouting at one another. And children can hardly come to appreciate the values we try to share with them if our demeanor suggests that anger is the fruit of our value system. [18]

Much of this sounds contradictory to our contemporary beliefs that anger should be ventilated and that anger is frequently justifiable. De Sales reminds us that much of our anger comes from our own inner struggles, and that we need to correct such outbursts by moderating them every day. [19] The ventilation of feelings is best done with a friend or a spiritual director. When anger is a serious problem, it is best shared with a value-laden, God-centered therapist who deals with anger transference. With respect to justified anger, that too should be dealt with in an appropriate forum of spiritual direction or therapy. Here anger can be appropriately ventilated and channeled into constructive behaviors that seek to remedy injustice. De Sales reminds us of the advice of St. Augustine:

It is better to deny entry to just and reasonable anger rather than welcome it, however small it may be. Because once it is let in, it is difficult to drive it out; insofar as it enters as a little shoot and in no time grows and becomes a tree. [20]

Furthermore, de Sales says, "no angry man ever thinks his anger to be unjust." [21] Finally, de Sales wisely reminds us that the feelings of anger that well up within us are not sinful in and of themselves. It is only when we act out of our anger in destructive ways that we sin. [22]

Worry

Part of my mother's legacy to me is my internal conviction that things will probably work out if I worry about them. De Sales tells us just the reverse. He says we should tend to our worldly affairs with care and diligence in a spirit of peace and tranquility. Worry simply clouds reason and good judgment. He points to Martha, whose problem wasn't that she did many things but that she was troubled by them. We are to maintain our equanimity of spirit, doing one thing at a time, trusting in the Lord.

He gives us the marvelous image of the child holding the father's hand, and he cautions us not to let go of the Father's hand with the false belief that we can accomplish more with two hands. How often have we

neglected the Lord under the guise of needing to get a lot done? Most of our worry stems from a concern of how we will look in the eyes of others if we don't succeed at something. De Sales reminds us that success lies in doing the will of God. [23] Success rests in carrying out those responsibilities the Lord has entrusted to us, with one eye focused on the Lord. So with care and diligence, holding the Father's hand, we do one thing at a time.

Detachment

De Sales understood that detachment was essential to the spiritual life if we were to make more room in our inner space for God. We need to let go of all that stands in the way of a closer union with God. We need to let go of the anger, worry, and anxiety that distracts us from being present to our Lord. We need to moderate our attachments to our property, family, and job. However, detachment is not disengagement. In fact, detachment, especially from others, should leave us free to love them more deeply. Our love is not rooted in what they are for us or can do for us. Our love is rooted in an abiding concern for their welfare. We love them for who they are and prize them for all that God is calling them to be. Such love is devoid of jealousy, personal expectations, and self-interest. Loving in this way is the central task of life in the Salesian tradition.

In a special way, we are called to this spirit of detachment in our closest relationships. I think of how difficult it is to respect the freedom of others and not to evaluate them in the context of how they are affecting me. I think of how enormously difficult it must be for parents to let go of their children and to respect their freedom to live life on their own and to make their own mistakes. We are called to teach our children, to share our insights and wisdom, and then to step back. We are called to detach not disengage. We must remember they are made in the image and likeness of God, not our image and likeness. We are called to love them even when we are clear with them that we don't share their values or their lack of values. At the heart of such detachment is the awareness and acceptance of

God's love as central in the lives of all of us. God's love is the source of all human love, and God has first claim on us. [24]

Conclusion

Wendy Wright, in the *Bond of Perfection*, writes that de Sales' vision of the Christian life

was not a monastic spirituality. Neither did it resemble the superficial injunctions to pious observance that passed for lay religious instruction at the time. Francis de Sales drank deeply from the springs of the contemplative tradition and had extracted from that tradition the essence of contemplative life which he managed to make applicable to persons in all walks of life. [25]

I believe that task is as important today as it was in the time of de Sales. Too much of what is spoken in the pulpit and on the airwaves is reminiscent of that superficial injunction to pious observance. Salesian spirituality provides wisdom and substantive nourishment for people of all walks of life. It is important that this legacy not only be treasured but also translated and interpreted for the contemporary age so that it is readily accessible for the nourishment of all God's people.

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NOTES

1. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*; Translated by Fr. Armind Nazareth, MSFS; Fr. Anthony Mookenthottam, MSFS; Fr. Anthony Kolencherry, MSFS (Malleswaram, Bangalore, India: SFS Publications, 1990) III, 15, p. 159. Also see Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*; 2 volumes, translated by Rt. Rev. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1974), Vol. I, VIII, p. 58.
2. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, 19, p.171.
3. *Ibid.*, III, 17, pp. 163-164.
4. See *Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, 17, pp. 163-165 and III, 19, pp. 169-172.
5. See *The Spiritual Conferences of St. Francis de Sales*, Translated by Abbot Gasquet and Canon Mackey (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1962), IV, pp. 71-73
6. See *Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, 20, pp. 172-175.
7. *Ibid.*, III, 19, pp. 169-172.
8. *Ibid.*, III, 38, pp. 221-228 and III, 39, pp. 229-232.
9. John 15:15
10. See *Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, 8, p. 66.
11. For an understanding of de Sales method for mental prayer, see *Introduction to the Devout Life*, II, 8, pp. 62 – 73.
12. Wendy M. Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal and Francis de Sales* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 62.

13. See *Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, p. 35, pp. 214-216; *Treatise XI*, 13: pp. 234-236.

14. See Wendy Wright and Joseph Power, OSFS, *The Classics of Western Spirituality: Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, "Introduction" (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 40-43 and *Treatise*, Books VIII-IX.

15. See *Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, 8, pp. 136 – 140

16. *Ibid.*, III, 8, p. 140.

17. See *The Classics of Western Spirituality: Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, p. 115.

18. See *Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, 8, pp. 136-140 and III, 9, pp. 141-143.

19. See *The Classics of Western Spirituality: Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, p. 110.

20. See *Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, pp. 138-139.

21. *Ibid.*, III, 8, p. 139.