For Personal Reflection

?

1. How do I define courtesy?
2. How do I want others to be courteous toward me?
3. How courteous am I when dealing with others? Friends? Family members? Co-workers? Neighbors? Classmates?
4. In what ways might I need to be more courteous in my relationships with others?
5. What are the places—or who are the people—that really challenge my ability to be courteous?
6. How common — or not-so-common — is my courtesy?

Further Reading

Spiritual Conferences. St. Francis de Sales. Abbot Gasquet and Dom Mackey, OSB, editor. Newman Press, 1962.

Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction. Peronne Marie Thibert, VHM, Trans. Wendy M. Wright and Joseph Power, OSFS. Paulist Press. 1988.

Spiritual Conferences. St. Francis de Sales. Abbot Gasquet and Dom Mackey, OSB, editor. Newman Press, 1962.

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Volume 5 **Number 10**

Salesian Perspectives is a series of pamphlets published by De Sales Spirituality Services. The series offers practical approaches to holiness based on the lives and legacies of St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal. Subscription information is available by contacting De Sales Spirituality Services.

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Not Common Enough?

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

Courtesy

Tell the truth. Don't steal. Be helpful. Don't lie. Be fair. Don't cheat. Be kind. Don't tease. In other words, treat others with common courtesy.

The problem is that courtesy doesn't seem as common as it used to be.

"Courtesy is nothing else than the essence of true and sincere friendship..."

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines *courtesy* as "characterized by gracious consideration toward others." When considering its synonyms like *polite*, we read "marked by or showing consideration for others, tact." (See also *mannerly, civil, genteel*.)

And *Common*? Definitions include: "Widespread, prevalent; occurring frequently or habitually, usual; standard." The dictionary also associates common as "relating to the community as a whole."

Common courtesy, therefore, is more than simply developing the habit of behaving in a polite, considerate or gracious manner toward others; it has something to do with the quality of community as a whole. Put another way, it is part of what it means to be human.

St. Francis de Sales defined courtesy (or cordiality) as "nothing else than the essence of true and sincere friendship, a friendship that can only exist between reasonable beings, people who foment and nourish their friendships by the dictates of reason." (Conferences, IV, p. 54)

What could be more important to one's own growth and the growth of community than relating to others truly and sincerely as friends?

In a letter addressed to Celse Benigne de Chantal, Francis de Sales wrote: "I should like you to cultivate a gentle and sincere courtesy which offends nobody but wins everybody. It seeks to gain love rather than honor. It never jests at anyone else's expense. It never injures. It never affronts anyone and is itself not affronted." (Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 187)

In his Conferences to the Sisters of the Visitation, Francis identified two virtues closely associated with courtesy or cordiality: affability and cheerfulness. "Affability is a virtue which spreads a certain agreeableness over all the business and serious communications which we have with one another, while cheerfulness is that which renders us gracious and agreeable in our recreations and less serious conversations with one another." (*Ibid*, p. 58)

"What could be more important to one's own growth and the growth of community than relating to others truly and sincerely as friends?"

Courtesy is meant to be common because it should be exhibited in every and all situations, not just in the few or exceptional. While Francis clearly intended that courtesy or cordiality would be the hallmark of these cloistered women, he also believed that it should be practiced by people living in every state and stage of life. He once observed: "The one who can preserve gentleness (courtesy, cordiality) in the midst of sorrows and sufferings and peace in the midst of the multiplicity and busyness of affairs: that person is almost perfect."

"Common courtesy... has something to do with the quality of community as a whole."

He should know. As we read in Letters of Spiritual Direction (pp. 64—65), Francis lived cordiality "in the midst of one of the most troubled epochs in history. Rent by the strife of religious and political warfare and torn by the interpersonal and familial vendettas of the aristocracy, the Europe of his day was a hotbed of violence. His mission to the Chablais, his youthful plans to retake Geneva by prayer and fasting...his own personal struggle to transform his anger in the peace of Christ…" all attest to the fact that courtesy and cordiality are not, as some might think, signs of weakness. No, courtesy and cordiality are powerful expressions of real discipline, conviction and strength.

The challenge in every age — in our age — is to practice common courtesy where and when God intends: everywhere, at all times, in all places. Be courteous. Be kind. Be considerate. Be gracious. Be graceful. Be affable.

Win hearts. Make friends. What a wonderful world this could be!