For Personal Reflection

?

1. During any given week, how often do I complain?
2. What are the things, the issues, the people or situations that I complain about?
3. When I complain about something, am I really looking for a solution or resolution, or do I value more the complaining?
4. Constant complaining may be a sign of old hurts that are festering or growing. Are there things, relationships or situations from my past that need to be revisited and resolved?
5. What might I need to let go of in order to complain less?

Further Reading

Book of Numbers. Hebrew Scriptures/Bible.

Francis de Sales. Introduction to the Devout Life. Various Editions.

St. Francis de Sales. Selected Letters. Elisabeth Stopp. Harper Brothers, 1960.

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.

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Complaints: Good For The Soul?

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

Think Again!

Before we consider anything else, let's simply acknowledge the fact that, at some point or another, we've all done it.

Complain, that is.

Defined as "to express feelings of pain, dissatisfaction or resentment," complaining may be as old as the human race itself. And to the extent that a pain, dissatisfaction or resentment may need to be addressed, complaining, if not necessarily an enjoyable or pleasant thing in itself, may sometimes be a necessary thing.

"Strong and staunch hearts only complain when there is something really important to complain about…"

The problem with complaining is that it can all too easily move from a critique of life to a way of life. Complaining is a 'gateway' activity that can lead to grumbling ("to complain in a surly manner; to mutter discontentedly") and grumpiness, that is, to become chronically cranky and ill-tempered.

Francis de Sales devoted a mere paragraph to this topic in his Introduction to the Devout Life. However short on words, it is long in wisdom: "Complain as little as possible about the wrongs that you suffer. Undoubtedly a person who complains commits a sin by doing so, since self-love always believes that injuries are worse than they really are." (Part III, Chapter 3)

At the very least, constant complaining leads to exaggeration. At its worst, chronic complaining leads to a distortion of the truth: also known as lying.

"Above all, do not complain to irascible or fault-finding persons, for they will stir up even worse difficulties…"

In a letter to a Madame de Peyzieu (October 1612), Francis de Sales made the following observation: "When we happen to complain about our neighbor (which ought to be a rare thing), we never leave off but begin the whole story over and over again, repeating our complaints and grievances endlessly. This is a sign of touchiness and of a heart that is not really healthy. By contrast, strong and staunch hearts only complain when there is something really important to complain about, and even then they do not harbor resentment, or, at least, they do not succumb to fuss and agitation." (Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 206)

Scripture itself describes dire consequences for chronic complainers. In the Book of Numbers (which tells of Israel's post-Egypt journey from Mt. Sinai to Canaan), we hear of two occasions on which, after complaining against God and Moses for having no food, the Israelites proceeded to complain about the quality of the very food that God, in his loving care, did provide. In one case, the "fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some at the outskirts of their encampment." (11:1-3) In the second case, "the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people, and many died."(21:4-7)

It is certainly not a stretch to consider how both fire and venom might represent the all-consuming and/or poisonous nature of constant complaining.

When legitimate complaints are warranted, we must be especially careful in choosing the people to whom the complaint is made: "Do so with those who are even-tempered and who really love God. Above all, do not complain to irascible or fault-finding persons, for instead of calming your mind they will stir up even worse difficulties, and in place of removing the thorn that is hurting you they will drive it even deeper into your foot." (Introduction, Part III, Chapter 3)

"At the very least, constant complaining leads to exaggeration. At worst, it leads to a distortion of truth."

For her part, St. Jane de Chantal advised: "Be guileless and open toward everyone. Accept lovingly admonishments and corrections. Never complain, murmur or blame others." (Letters of Spiritual Direction, p. 261)

At times, each of us will need to address injury and injustice. May God give us the strength to air our complaints without becoming complainers.