For Personal Reflection

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1. How do I define the term detachment?
2. What are some ways that I practice detachment—in spirit—in my own life?
3. What are some ways that I practice detachment—in fact—in my own life?
4. Jesus challenges us to give up our possessions in order to be possessed by him. Is there anything in my life at this point to which I am too attached? Are there any possessions in my life that might, in spirit or in fact, posses me?
5. Detachment is fundamentally the choice to live life gratefully and generously. In what ways can I be more generous with what I have and with who I am?

Further Reading

Pulpit and Pew: A Study in Salesian Preaching. Vincent Kerns, MSFS. S.F.S. Printing School. India: Visakhapatnam, 1976.

Introduction to the Devout Life. St. Francis de Sales. Translated by John K. Ryan. Image Books, Doubleday. 1989. Part III, Chapters 14—16.

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Leaving All...

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

For One...And Others

In his book Catholicism, Richard P. McBrien makes the following observation: "Francis de Sales sought to bring Christian piety out of the monasteries and convents into the world of the average lay person by showing the connection between Christian life and everyday occupations, and by emphasizing the joy of Christian existence." (p. 1068)

"Remember that a person who has only a little should take leave of that little, and the person who has a lot should take leave of his plenty: both can be equally obedient to our Lord's command…"

It is in this sprit of joy and the need to integrate Christian living with the demand of everyday life that Francis de Sales addresses one of the more important—and most frequently misunderstood—spiritual concept: detachment.

In Luke 14: 33, Jesus tells us that we cannot be his disciples unless we renounce all of our possessions. In a sermon given in October 1622, Francis remarked: "This rule of our Lord's applies to everybody, great or small, in religion or in the world. It also applies to everything. Our Lord did not advise us to leave the greater par of our possessions: the word all admits of no exceptions."

Detachment from everything we possess, be it materials, social, physical, spiritual. What does this mean? How do we do this?

Francis's advice comes in four parts. "*Firstly*, we are bound to take leave of everything. However, all are not called to literally leave everything, or to the same extent as those who make a vow of poverty. It is the spirit of detachment that is required." In this we hear echoes of the Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," (Mt 5: 3) the challenge to keep our hearts free from inordinate attachment to any/all things that we possess...rather than allow them to possess us.

Francis continues. "*Secondly*, those who aspire to greater perfection take leave of the things of this world not only in spirit, but in fact. This does not mean, however, that the spirit of detachment is insufficient in itself for gaining heaven. Consider the example of St. Louis: he laid aside his royal crown in spirit only—not in fact—yet he inherited the kingdom of heaven. David, too, was a great and powerful king; yet, he did this without surrendering his dignity and lived the life of a prophet, a life of great holiness."

"Detachment from everything we possess, be it materials, social, physical, spiritual. What does this mean? How do we do this?"

Preserving our hearts from our possessions may, in fact, lead to renouncing them in fact, in effect. However, this effect may be caused by our need to share our possessions, gifts, talents, abilities, blessings by placing them at the service of others. As we see in the two examples of kings cited above, detachment from possessions is not the same as abdication of possessions.

Of course, in order to be detached from our possessions, it is important to first understand what we, in fact, possess! "*Thirdly*, we must realize just what it is that we possess. We might otherwise make the mistake of leaving something that is not ours to leave...Our Lord teaches us that our first endeavor must be to forego our present possessions before taking leave of what might possibly be ours later."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5: 3) is the challenge to keep our hearts free from inordinate attachment to any/all things that we possess...rather than allow them to possess us…"

"*Fourthly*, our resolve to take leave of all things should have a firm foundation...it is up to us to ensure that our resolve is guaranteed to see us through to the completion of our aim." In other words, to practice the affect of detachment—and to practice it, when required, in effect—is not for the faint of heart.

As he does so well, Francis de Sales boils his understanding about detachment down to this: "Remember that a person who has only a little should take leave of that little, and the person who has a lot should take leave of his plenty: both can be equally obedient to our Lord's command, for each had the same intention of leaving everything." If we consider that most of the things we possess are gifts from God in the first place, detachment is a commitment to live this challenge: what you have received as a gift, give—in spirit, in fact— as a gift.