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De Sales Discussions

Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction

Selected and Introduced
by Wendy Wright and Joseph F. Power, OSFS

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De Sales

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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 leaders is to be a catalyst. They are 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 leaders necessarily know more about the subject under discussion, but that they are 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 any particular 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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Pages 34 through 48
Discussion Questions

We will provide questions for the first three themes. During the discussion do not feel the need to complete all the questions. Any questions not covered can be carried over to the next session.

Theme I 1) What is Francis' image of God? What is his view of man? What is his view of creation?

2) What is the relation between the human and divine?

Theme II 1) What does Francis mean by "the signified will of God" and "the will of God's good pleasure?"

2) What does it mean to live between the wills?

Theme III 1) According to Francis, one "lives Jesus" "in the midst." Explain.

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Pages 49 through 69
Discussion Questions

We are providing questions up through Theme VI, though we expect not to cover them all. During the discussion do not feel the need to complete all the questions. Any questions not covered can be carried over to the next session.

Theme IV 1) What is the role of human freedom in the Spirituality of Francis De Sales?

2) What is the Salesian sense of “indifference” and how does it effect the Salesian method of prayer?

Theme V 1) What is the difference between Francis's Spirituality and that of the Desert Fathers?

2) What image does Francis use in showing that we are made in the image and likeness of God? What image have other spiritual writers chosen? How does this choice affect one's spirituality?

3) What is the nature of Spiritual Direction in the Salesian Tradition?

Theme VI 1) What does an appreciation of the little things do for one's spirituality?

2) To what does living a life of "gentleness" lead? What can I do to practice "gentleness" each day?

3) To what does the practice of humility lead?

4) What does the practice of seeking out the "little ones" mean for us today?

5) In what does the virtue of "simplicity" consist?

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Pages 70 through 90
Discussion Questions

1) How was the spirituality of Francis and Jane shaped by their different environments and by the difference between a masculine and feminine experience and approach to life?

2) How was this difference expressed in the way they lived out "Salesian Spirituality" specifically with regard to 3 Salesian Themes?

a) Abandonment to the Will of God's God Pleasure

b) The Possibility of Human Perfection

c) Prayer Life

3) Does the discussion in the book regarding the differences in the approach to spirituality because of one's environment and gender ring true in your experience or not?

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Pages 95 through 102
Discussion Questions

With this section we begin to read the actual letters!! This week we will discuss the letters to Mademoiselle de Soulfour.

1) How does Francis view the role of patience in one's life? Why?

2) Is Francis' Spirituality an Idealistic or Realistic Spirituality? Show examples to illustrate your opinion.

3) How does Francis view imperfection in ourselves & others?

4) According to Francis, what is one of the greatest obstacles to devotion and real virtue? Why?

5) What is Francis' advice on how to pray?

6) According to Francis, why do we pray?

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Pages 103 through 116
Discussion Questions

This session we will discuss the letters to Madame Brulart.

1) What are the means for Christians to attain perfection? What are the principal means of uniting ourselves to God? To neighbor? (p102)

2) What is the overriding principle that governs how much time is devoted to prayer and good works? (p104)

3) How should we go about discerning and doing God's Will a) in small things and b) in important things? What should be our approach if we fail? (p. 105-106)

4) What is the best method for us to help our loved ones progress in the spiritual life? (p. 110)

5) What is the most important and least understood point of the Spiritual Life? (p. 112)

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Pages 116 through 130
Discussion Questions

We will discuss the letters to Rose Bourgeois and the first letter to Madame de Chantal.

To Rose Bourgeois

1) What is Francis' view of suffering and what are its benefits?

2) In the face of suffering what are the three things we must do to have peace? What is its relationship to, and the value of, "the sword?"

3) What does Francis say about how we should look upon our faults? Upon the faults of others? What is the role of humility in our lives?

4) How does Francis feel about openness and directness toward himself?

To Jane de Chantal
May 3, 1604

5) According to the authors what are the five facets of a spiritual friendship?
Are they useful for spiritual friendships today?

6) According to Francis what are the two pillars of the Devout Life for Jane?
How would they apply to me?

7) What is Francis' view on the use of specific prayers, meditations and
spiritual practices used to attain perfection?

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Pages 130 through 155
Discussion Questions

To Jane de Chantal
October 14, 1604

1) In this letter what are the steps in decision-making process mentioned by Francis?

2) What does Francis say we should do when confronted by temptation?

3) What does Francis mean by “DO ALL THROUGH LOVE, NOTHING THROUGH CONSTRAINT; LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN DISOBEDIENCE.” What examples does he give to Jane? Do they apply to circumstances in my everyday life? (Pg. 134 & 138ff)

4) What does Francis mean when he says “we must touch the hearts of others as do the angels, delicately and without coercion?” What examples does he give to Jane? Do they apply similarly to our lives?

June 8, 1606

5. Why does Francis say he is going to try to live a healthier life? (pp. 144 & 147)

Feb. 11, 1607

6. What aspects of Francis’ character do you get from this letter?

Jan 16, 1610

7. What does he mean by “Wait while you wait?” How could that apply to our lives?

8. What does Francis mean when he says that “Staying in God’s presence & placing ourselves in God’s presence are two different things?”

March 28, 1612

9. Was there anything in this letter that spoke to you?

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Pages 155 through 163
Discussion Questions

To Madame de Limojon
June 28, 1605

1) What is Francis trying to say to us through his images of pruning and sculpting?

2) According to Francis what is the main lesson that Jesus left us? How are we to remember that lesson and keep it before us all day?

3) How does Bishop Francis de Sales wish to be addressed and why?

To Madame de la Fléchère
April 8 & May 19, 1608

What are the main points of these two letters? What point speaks to you most?

January 20, 1609

1) What is Francis' remedy for fear of death? Can this remedy, or one like it, apply to other difficulties in our lives?

2) What does Francis mean when he says that God "wishes to speak to us from the thorny bush . . . ?"

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Pages 164 through 182
Discussion Questions

To Peronne-Marie de Chantal

1) What is Francis trying to show in his description of the “two Women” who are in Peronne-Marie de Chantal? What is its application to us? p. 164 ff

2) What does Francis mean when he says “...don’t be ashamed of being a little grimy and dusty?”

Madame de Granieu

1) What according to Francis is the role of reflection and words in prayer? What is the “secret of secrets” in prayer? (p. 167)

Angelique Arnauld

1) How should we handle the fact that some spiritual guides do not meet all of our spiritual needs? What is Francis' advice for us when we become afraid that we cannot persevere in the Devout Life? (p. 170)

2) When we are tempted to characterize someone as a fool, what is Francis' advice? (p. 171)

3) What type of encouragement does Francis give to Angelique about "these stirrings of passion" that she experiences and the "fickleness and inconstancy" of her soul? (p. 173)

4) What is Francis' advice in dealing with "thoughts of vanity and with what type of demeanor should we conduct ourselves? (p. 175)

Madame de Villesavin

1) What should you do when you are in the midst of a conversation where something is being said or done which is not good? (p. 179)

A Gentleman

1) What is the importance of hope in Francis de Sales? (p.180 ff)

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Pages 185 through 219
Discussion Questions

Letters of Jane de Chantal.

1) Who was Noël Brulart? What piece of advice did Jane give to him that speaks to you and your spiritual life? What piece of advice doesn't speak to you or does not make sense?

2) Who was André Frémyot? What piece of advice did Jane give to him that speaks to you and your spiritual life? What piece of advice doesn't speak to you or does not make sense?

3) What advice does Jane give to her daughter, Françoise de Chantal, that you agree with and would give to your children? What advice would you not?

4) How does Jane address the death of her daughter's child and husband?

5) How does Jane view the possessions her daughter has and their role in her daughter's life?

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Pages 219 through 237
Discussion Questions

In all of these letters try to see how Jane's advice can apply to your own life.

1) How did Jane deal with the difficult situation of Marie-Aimée de Morville?
What does this suggest to us in how we might be toward others?

2) What bits of advice that Jane has given to Marie-Aimée in these 8 letters do
you find particularly helpful for yourself?

3) In Jane's letter to Sister Péronne-Marie de Châtel (2/9/1616) what is Jane's
approach to a person's failings? What role does weakness play?

4) In Jane's letter to Mother Jeanne-Charlotte de Brécharde (2/16/1617) what is her advice regarding correcting the sisters?

5) In Jane's letter to Mother Marie-Jacqueline Favre (1617) what is Jane's advice when encountering "people who have difficulty understanding our way of life?"

4) How does Jane view the trials, tribulations, pain and suffering that are a part of each day?

5) What type of people does Jane choose as superiors and why?

6) If those people under your supervision and care do not progress as you expect, what is Jane's view.

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 _____