

Introduction

"Wherever we may be, we can and should aspire to a perfect life." So wrote St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), bishop and a doctor of the Church, nearly 400 years ago in his spiritual classic, the Introduction to the Devout Life. Writing primarily for lay people, Francis stressed that God calls all of us to lead a holy life. Holiness (or what he calls a life of devotion) is possible and, because God wills it, God will certainly inspire and encourage all those who seek to lead holy lives.

Working together with another great saint, Jane de Chantal (1572-1641), Francis showed how people in all walks of life can become holy. Their ideas have become known as SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY. Like other schools of Christian spirituality, Salesian spirituality helps believers to develop a deeper relationship with God through Jesus. Its distinctiveness arises from the particular elements that it emphasizes. This pamphlet -- by no means an exhaustive treatment of Salesian spirituality -- highlights those major elements. We hope that this overview of Salesian spirituality will encourage readers to explore its richness for themselves.

Made in God's Image

We are made in God's image and likeness. Therefore, all of us share a common dignity: we are sons and

daughters of God. Made in God's image and likeness, all of us share a common destiny: to live forever in that love with God and one another. Recognizing this, we treat each person (including ourselves) with profound respect and reverence. In the midst of an all-too-frequently violent society -- at school, in the workplace, at home, on the street -- Salesian spirituality calls us to respond (rather than react) to our world and the people in it in a gentle, balanced way.

We are challenged to live gently, first of all, with ourselves. Francis reminds us not to become upset, obsessed or discouraged by our failings. Rather, Francis desires that we seize the courage to pick ourselves up and move on after we fail. He counsels: "Be patient with everyone, but above all with yourself." Gentleness with ourselves leads to gentleness with others. We learn to let go of judgmental attitudes and become more compassionate. The desire for retaliation or revenge--the source of so much violence in our world--gives way to forgiveness. By striving to live this way we become peacemakers in our homes and in the community at large.

Salesian spirituality recognizes that each person is unique and unrepeatable. Since each person has a different character and different gifts, holiness will feel -- and look -- differently for each of us. How, then, do I become holy? Quite simply, says Francis de Sales, by doing God's will, that is, by living in

ways that display our God-given dignity and destiny. He exhorts: "Do not wish to be anything but what you are, and try to be that perfectly." Recognizing that God's will for us is embedded in the state and stage of life in which we find ourselves, Salesian spirituality stresses the importance of embracing the ordinary demands and responsibilities of our vocation -- a challenge indeed, for each of us, for all of us. Stretched by the demands of family and job, beset by financial concerns, regretful about the past, worried about the future, we may want to run away--in our imagination, if not in fact. Perhaps we will find God in some less hectic setting! Maybe we'd be happier somewhere else, doing something else or being someone else! However, Francis reminds us that God is closest to us precisely in the busyness of our vocation. "It is not tranquility which brings God close to our hearts... it is rather the fidelity of our love," he says.

Following God's will calls for ongoing, prayerful discernment. In the Salesian way of looking at life, discernment often involves a balancing. On the one hand, we require a certain openness, or flexibility, to respond when the Holy Spirit calls us to new ways of thinking and acting. On the other hand, perseverance (which includes planning and determination) in one's vocation is essential for spiritual growth. Francis reminds us: "Just as a shrub that is often transplanted cannot take root and as a result cannot come to maturity and yield

the desired fruit, so the soul that transplants its heart from plan to plan cannot profit or gain proper growth in perfection, since perfection does not consist in beginnings but in accomplishments."

Do All Through Love

Salesian spirituality challenges us to become holy--to become saints! Salesian spirituality is often described as a "spirituality of the heart," the place in which divine love and human love become one in the same. Love alone motivates and sustains our quest for holiness. "Do all through love, nothing through fear," wrote Francis.

As we know, love is hard work: it isn't for the faint of heart. It requires knowing when to take hold and knowing when to let go. In an age that over-emphasizes self-actualization and self-fulfillment (often at the expense of others), Salesian spirituality points to a different way to find fulfillment and happiness. It calls us to practice interior discipline, to practice the "little virtues": patience with aging parents or rebellious teenagers, gentleness and humility with friends and co-workers, and simplicity in our lifestyle. In the quiet of our hearts we learn to turn everything over to God, to die to our self-absorption, to live totally for Jesus by loving one another. Salesian spirituality understands that spiritual progress comes slowly and, often, at great cost. At the same time, it also maintains that in turning our hearts to God and in

doing God's will we find our greatest happiness and fulfillment.

The Present Moment

We only have the present moment, the here and now, in which to respond to God. But focusing on the present can be difficult: it requires a tremendous amount of energy and effort. We may find it much easier to spend our time regretting past actions, or fretting about an uncertain future. Even positive memories, or daydreams about happy times to come, can distract us from what is happening within us and around us right here, right now. If we are unduly preoccupied with either the past or the future we may miss how God is calling us to be with Him or one another in a particular moment. Francis de Sales insists that each present moment contains seeds of eternity, and insofar as there is no past or future in God, we can already experience something of divine life in this life by choosing to live in the 'now' of every moment.

Holiness and Relationships

Salesian spirituality is profoundly relational; it realizes that spiritual progress comes in and through relationships. Holiness does not develop in a vacuum or in isolation. Within the family, for example, we are challenged to grow daily in the little virtues. As we perform ordinary tasks--cleaning, cooking, helping with homework, planning a birthday

party, celebrating an anniversary--with extraordinary love, we find God. We truly become like Jesus as we seek to work out our salvation in our relationships with one another.

Personal spirituality grows within the Christian community. As we gather to hear God's word and celebrate God's presence, we are energized by the faith and commitment of others. They challenge us to offer our gifts to the community, to move us beyond self-preoccupation and self-absorption to a greater concern for what is good for all.

Within this community of faith strong spiritual friendships may develop. Salesian spirituality values such friendships as a gift from God. Already in love with God, these friends grow in love for each other, and express this love in generous, often creative, service to the community--indeed, to the world. In their own enduring friendship St. Francis and St. Jane give us a model of an incredibly chaste and fruitful love that touched the lives of countless people. Spiritual friends challenge and support us: they want the best for us; they expect the best from us, just like our loving God does.

Salesian Optimism

When fear and doubt threaten to overwhelm us, Salesian spirituality points to signs of hope-- yes, even joy. True, sin and its terrible effects are real. But sin is not the final word. God has spoken his final word in Jesus Christ. Jesus offers us

the grace to fulfill our human potential: to become lovers of God and neighbor, to grow in holiness--to become saints! Trusting in God's providence, knowing that God will ultimately turn everything to the good, Salesian spirituality radiates optimism. Whether in the midst of great trials, great joys or the multiplicity of little things in between our hearts can be at peace, secure in the knowledge that "the same God who takes care of us today will take care of us tomorrow and always."

In the Salesian tradition, the glass of life is always (at least) 'half full'.



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PRACTICAL HOLINESS



Salesian Perspectives
On Living the Gospel

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