

De Sales

SPIRITUALITY CENTER

"Going my way...or Christ's?"



Mary D. Ford

The whimsical film Going My Way, starring Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald, tells the tale of how a new, young "modernistic" curate and an elderly pastor forge an unlikely bond as they work together to save a rundown, debt-heavy St. Dominic's parish in New York City.

This sentimental story (that first screened publicly on April 27, 1944) captured no fewer than nine Academy Awards the following year.

If we were to produce a film to describe what it means to be a follower of Christ, it might be entitled: Going His Way. "If any person has a mind to come my way, let them renounce themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me," proclaimed Saint Francis de Sales in a sermon delivered in 1614. "These words of our Lord contain a complete summary of Christian perfection."

What does it mean to be "Going His way?" "In the first place, our Lord says that we must renounce self. This implies a change of heart. That is what life is for. As long as we live, there will always be room for a change of heart. Our greatest mistake would be to think that we had ever done enough, that we had reached perfection."

Drawing from an image used

by St. Paul, Francis de Sales elaborates upon this notion of self-renunciation. "We have two selves: the earth-born and the heaven-born. The latter is the source of our good deeds, the instinct by which we love God and look forward to the joys of heaven: there is no need to change that. It is the other self, the earth-born, which we must renounce. This is the source of disordered passions, bias toward evil, sinful desires: in a word, self-love. It is the earth-born self that we must renounce in order to encourage the heaven-born. As the lower dimension of our nature is worn down, the higher life of the spirit is refreshed from day to day."

Renouncing the self-centered or self-absorbed self, of course, is only half the battle. Francis de Sales observed: "Secondly, our Lord says that we must take up our cross. This means that we are to accept gladly all the trials, contradictions, sufferings and mortifications which life will bring. There may be some satisfaction that comes from renouncing one's self (hard though it be), since it is our choice: but when we take up our cross we are embracing something that is imposed on us, something we are not anxious to carry."

Sometimes we think that the bigger the cross, the better it must be for our own spiritual growth or advancement. Francis observed: "The value of the cross lies not in its weight but in the way we carry it. I would go so far as to say that carrying a cross made of straw may require greater virtue than one made of wood, because a small, light cross demands greater attention for fear of losing it." Sometimes it is the smallest of inconveniences and setbacks that may pose the greatest challenges.

Finally, after renouncing self-centeredness and taking up our crosses, we must follow Jesus himself. "It is important for us to understand that 'going his way' and 'following him' are two very different things. All Christians who seek heaven are 'going his way' because it is through Christ's merits that we hope to reach it. To follow our Lord, however, means to walk in his footsteps, to imitate his virtues, to do his will and to be of one mind and heart with him."

Each of us is called to imitate Christ in ways that fit the state and stage of life we find ourselves. Each of us has a cross to carry that is unique to us. In the end, however, it all comes down to whose way we are following: ours, or His?

