

SALESIAN STEPS
TO
SPIRITUAL
SERENITY

by

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About St. Francis de Sales

St. Francis de Sales is known as one of the great theologians of the Catholic Counter-Reformation of the 17th century. He believed that people of every vocation and avocation are called to live a holy life.

Born of aristocratic parents in 1567 in the family castle in Thorens, Savoy, located in what is now southeastern France, St. Francis, as a young nobleman, went on to study literature, law, philosophy and theology in Paris and Padua and received a doctorate in civil and canon law.

In opposition to his father's wishes that he pursue a secular career, Francis chose to answer God's call to the priesthood and was ordained in 1593 at the age of 26. He was consecrated bishop of Geneva at the age of 35, and remained bishop of Geneva for 20 years until the end of his life in 1622.

While bishop of Geneva, he became the spiritual director of St. Jane de Chantal, and with her, founded the Order of the Visitation Nuns.

Among his great works of spiritual literature are the Introduction to a Devout Life and The Treatise on the Love of God.

St. Francis de Sales died at the age of 55 in 1622. He was canonized in 1665 and was declared a Doctor of the Universal Church by Pope Pius IX in 1879.

PREFACE

As I attempt to publish these talks in printed form, I wish to again dedicate them to the Blessed Mother under the title of Our Lady of Light and ask her continued help in this effort to spread the message of Jesus Christ through the spiritual vision of St. Francis de Sales.

Much of what I say here is taken from a pamphlet by a Jesuit priest, Joseph A. Sommer, S.J. that he called "9 Keys to Mental Health," which he acknowledged to be based on the recovery program of Dr. Abraham Low, and Sacred Scripture and the 12 steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous.

After a couple of serious depressions and being treated for alcoholism (I was involved in both of these programs), I found this pamphlet most helpful for my own attempts at recovery. I made a tape-recording of its contents and would listen to it for hours on end.

Some time later, I attended a workshop by another Jesuit priest, Rev. Bernard J. Tyrell, S.J. who had written on Christo-therapy. He encouraged us to spread the Christian message as a way to peace.

Being an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, and being familiar with the Salesian spirituality of De Sales, I tried to combine his ideas with those of the pamphlet of Fr. Sommer; and I came up with this program that I called the Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity.

After presenting this program in parishes over the last several years, and now being retired at our retirement home in Childs, Maryland, I am trying to make it available in this printed form, hoping that, by God's grace, it will continue to help people find the peace that Christ came to bring, the peace that Christ wants us to have, so we can spread that peace to others.

I would like to express my thanks for the help and encouragement I have received in this endeavor, especially to Rev. John J. Conmy, OSFS, for his encouragement, and to Mr. John Higgins and Ms Monica Scharff, R.N., for their proof reading, and to Mrs. Christine Breed for her typing the final copies.

Recurring Themes of Salesian Spirituality

1. God loves each of us unconditionally, despite our faults, failures, and even our sins.
2. We need to practice humility, acknowledging our ultimate dependence upon and need for God.
3. We need to practice humility, treating ourselves and others with profound respect and reverence.
4. We need to be kind, caring and cordial toward others, especially those closest to us.
5. We need to identify and deal with those issues that undermine our relationship with God, self and others.
6. We need to fully embrace the only time we have: the present moment.
7. We need to name and claim the power of our emotions.
8. We need to grow in our awareness that God is present in every place, situation and relationship in which we find ourselves.
9. We need to see ourselves, others and our world through the eyes of God.
10. We need to do our level best to bring our dream for ourselves in conformity with God's dream for us.

Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity

Step I. We believe we need the power of an all good and loving God who knows us and loves us unconditionally, and made us to be happy by loving and serving Him by serving others. We trust Him enough to turn our will and our lives over to His loving care to gain the peace He wants us to have. Page 6

Step II. Trusting in God's unconditional love for us, with all our faults and failings, we humbly and sincerely and fearlessly examine ourselves to see in what way we are trying to be, or expecting others to be exceptional. Page 11

Step III. We humbly ask God to give us in our every day life: Page 14

1. Courage to make mistakes. Have a sense of humor.
2. Patience to be satisfied with small gains.
3. The will to do what we should, despite our poor feelings.
4. The will to bear discomfort. No pain. No gain.

Step IV. We believe that God made us to work for others. Our difficulties come from concentrating too much on ourselves. Moreover, what we do for others, we do for God and, thus, thank God for all that God has done for us. Page 17

Step V. We humbly ask God to help us: Page 20

1. To avoid concentrating on any real or imaginary wrong done to us by others, and, thus,
2. To avoid remaining angry, resentful, impatient or disgusted with others.

Step VI. We ask God to give us a sense of security in our daily living by trusting in the power of His love for us. Thus, we will not be unduly disturbed by, or give into feelings of discouragement, preoccupation with ourselves, embarrassment, worry, sense of shame, inadequacy or hopelessness. Page 23

Step VII. We ask God to help us to understand more clearly how serving God by serving brings satisfaction, happiness and nobility to our lives To this end, we promise through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious awareness with God as we understand Him, through Christ and His Church, praying for knowledge and love of God's will for us and the power to carry that out. God made us to love Him, and we show that love by service to God and others. Page 28

Step VIII. We humbly ask God for the courage, strength and will to live life as fully as we can with all its activities, eventualities and responsibilities, especially those with which we are most familiar, and to reject all feelings of nervous fatigue. Page 31

Step IX. We accept our emotional suffering, thank God for it, and offer it to God as a powerful way of helping those whom we love. Page 34

The Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity

Step I. *We need the power of an all-good and all-loving God who knows us and loves us and made us to be happy by loving and serving Him by serving others. We trust Him enough to place our wills and our lives into the hands of God's loving care.*

St. Francis de Sales, like all the great spiritual directors of the Church, emphasized humility before God as the foundation of any spiritual program: humility, in terms of recognizing our need for God and our dependence on God. Unless we acknowledge our real need for God and dependence on God, God isn't going to be able to do much for us. It is said that to the extent we feel that we can solve our own problems without God, to that extent we deprive ourselves of the help we need. And there are many people in our world who seem to have no need for God, especially in our American culture where there is so much emphasis on freedom and independence.

We as Christians, and especially as Catholics, have no problem expressing our intellectual belief in God and even in His becoming human in Christ, but to feel a real need for God in everything we do is something is far more challenging because it requires a certain degree of humility that is countercultural in our society, where "being number one" is so greatly valued. "I am the best and the heck with the rest." That is the cry that we hear so often in our culture. And so to admit our dependence on anyone, even on God, is difficult. There are many people here in America who desire that this country to be free and independent even from God. They want no interference from God or the Church or any other authority above the Supreme Court.

By denying our dependence on God, we deprive ourselves of the very foundation of the help we need to achieve the emotional and moral stability for which we are striving. To deny our dependence on God is to deprive ourselves of the source of strength we need to find our own personal value and worth. It is only by admitting our dependence on God and making ourselves open to God's help that we can grow and thrive as

responsible moral human beings. Without God as a source of strength, we are left to our own limited resources to survive in a world of forces and pressures that are beyond our comprehension and capacity to manage. The physical and mental and emotional and moral forces of daily life are beyond our power to control, and so we become victims of persuasion and deception and manipulation and exploitation. Buy this. Look like this. And when we include compulsions and addictions we don't have a chance. We become the victims. Many of us have been seduced to believe that we can solve our problems by pleasure, power, or wealth. Problem is, in the long run, it doesn't work. We become addicted to our appetites and victims of our own greed.

But with God's power we can defend ourselves and successfully manage the pressures and powers of the world. God unites us with others through Christ His Son, the Spirit and the Church to become a force for goodness and freedom in our world. .

That is why Mass and the sacraments are so important: To unite us with Christ and with one another. And the Church has a sacramental spirituality, and so if you really want to be a follower of Jesus, you need the Mass and the celebration of the sacraments.

When you miss Mass for the first time, it bothers you. When you miss Mass over a longer period of time it may bother you less. And at some point it might not matter at all. And then you don't really believe in the Mass, that it is really Christ offering Himself for your sins. And then you don't believe in the Church and you make up your own rules. If you really want to a follower of Jesus, you need the Mass and the sacraments: that is the way we maintain and strengthen our relationship with God. And that is what is really important, our relationship with God. If we are grounded in God, we can handle the rest. If we aren't grounded in God, we can't handle anything: even the smallest things seem insurmountable.

The next point I wish to make under this first step is the kind of God we believe in, because so often we have a completely false notion of God as a very strict and forbidding God, a God who wants to control us and keep us from being really happy.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

We believe, and we remind ourselves in this step, that we believe in an all good and loving God who loves us unconditionally: with all our faults and failings. God's love for us does not depend upon our efforts: God loves us as we are with all our faults and failings, even with our sins. There is nothing we can do to keep God from loving us. God really wants us to be happy, and so God wants us to live in ways that will really make us happy, and God also wants us to turn away from those things that will make us unhappy. God really knows what's best for us.

But we have to trust God; trust God enough to do it God's way. And so we have to discover what is God's way for us to be truly happy. What is God's will for us that will really lead to true happiness?

Well, we learn from simple logic that everything should do what it is made to do. And so the way to be truly happy for us is by doing what we are made to do. That is the key. The secret to real happiness or fulfillment is to do what God made us to do.

And what is that?

We believe that God became a man, a human being, to teach us what is His will for a human being to do and also to redeem us and make up for our sins, but His life was a lesson on how to live. Jesus' life is a lesson on what is God's will for us.

Jesus said, "I have come to do the will of the Father." And Jesus said, "The Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve." And then Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." He came to love and serve others, and His whole life was a lesson in love, caring and sharing, helping and healing, and giving Himself for others through love, even to His very life on the cross.

And then Jesus told us, "Whoever gives his life for my sake will save it." This is the paradox of the Cross.

The other dimension of this mystery? "Whoever saves his life for himself will lose it." It is the selfish self-indulgence, trying to get everything for oneself, while giving nothing for others, that really makes people miserable so that they really become losers. Selfishness is the basic addiction that makes the addict miserable, whether it is alcohol or drugs or sex or money or power or pleasure or whatever it is, and we can be addicted to almost anything: it is all selfishness.

We don't care about anybody but ourselves...our family, our kids, our job... just so we get that drink or drug, or whatever it is that has become the god of our life. And after a while, we even hate ourselves for what we have done to those we should love.

We've all had this experience in one form or another, at one time or another.

But if we do what is God's will for us, if we do what we are made to do by loving and serving others for love of Him, by being kind and thoughtful of others, we will start to be really appreciated by others. We will become more pleasant and gracious to be around. People will begin to like and appreciate us more; we will make more friends and gain more acceptance from others, and we'll be able to handle the cares and concerns of life with a new strength and courage. It works; it really works. If we ask ourselves when our happiest moments were, wasn't it when we are doing for others, helping others, doing something for someone else?

And when are we most miserable? When we are selfish, just thinking of ourselves. Trying to have it all and finding out that it doesn't work. There is not enough. There is never enough. The more we get, the more we want. Selfishness is futile, and it is self-destructive.

The final point of this first step is the willingness to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God. That takes a great deal of trust, trust in God's goodness, in God's love and care for us, that He will never ask us to do anything that will really hurt us. So we have to trust in Christ, in the words of Christ as taught us in the Church, not only by the priest at Mass but by our parents, or God parents, or grand parents, or whoever it was who loved us enough to teach us about the Faith.

Those ideas of our need for God and His loving care for us is what Christianity is all about. We believe that that is why God became a man in Christ: to teach us what is the meaning of life. Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? How do we get there? These are the big questions of life, answers to which can provide the key for experiencing true serenity.

We have to trust in the words of those who tried to teach us. That might be difficult for some at this time and so let us consider the lesson of our experience. Let's consider what happened in our own lives when we

tried to insist on our own way, in opposition to the generous concern for others that Christ asks of us:

When I refused to do the job I was supposed to do?

When I refused to get up on time?

When I refused to go home on time?

When I insisted on those extra drinks or drugs?

When I tried to play the big shot?

When I refused to take no for an answer?

When I tried to escape from reality and refused responsibility?

When I just cared about myself and no one else?

What was the result of that kind of behavior in my life?

Yes, experience confirms the truth of Christ's message. We are made to love and to serve others through love, and that is the only way we can really find peace and happiness in our lives. But we know that it is not always that simple and so we will be considering some of the problems and pitfalls in discerning what is God's will in certain situations.

Let us pray...

Lord, help us to realize how much we need You and to trust You enough to do Your will and gain Your peace.

St. Francis de Sales, pray for us.

The Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity

Step II. *Trusting in God's unconditional love for us, with all our faults and failings, we humbly, sincerely and fearlessly examine ourselves to see in what way we are trying to be or expecting others to be exceptional.*

When our Lord told us in the Gospel, "He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted," He gave us a great clue on preserving our mental health, peace of mind and spiritual serenity.

Nothing creates more pressure and causes us more anxiety and worry than trying to make ourselves superhuman, putting excessive demands and expectations on ourselves and others. Nothing so surely brings disappointment and discouragement as failing to live up to our excessive expectations, no matter how unrealistic they may be. St. Francis de Sales says it is better to want little than to have more.

Every time we expect too much of anyone, we are going to be disappointed. That disappointment can lead to discouragement, loss of self-confidence and self-respect and even to depression.

And so it is good for us, when we feel ourselves getting discouraged and depressed to ask ourselves: are we trying to be superhuman? Are we trying to make ourselves something other than who we are, something other than who God wants us to be?

This can be a scary. Any time we want to look at ourselves to see some of our faults and failings, in any regard, that can be scary and unpleasant, and so we usually try to avoid it. We don't like to face up to our faults, because it might cause us to feel unlovable, and that is something that none of us wants. We all want and need to feel accepted and loved. Some more than others, but we all want to feel accepted and loved, at least by ourselves.

Before we take that hard look at ourselves, we should first assure ourselves that God loves us. We believe in an all-good and loving God, a God who made us and knows us better than anyone else. God loves us, not because of anything we do or don't do, but as we are with all our faults and failings: there is nothing we can do to keep God from loving us. There

are things that we do that He does not like or approve of, things that offend Him; but He never stops loving us and trying to get us to stop doing those harmful things, not because they hurt Him, but because they hurt us.

Every time we do something that is wrong, what we call sinful, we don't hurt God; we hurt others whom God loves, and we hurt especially ourselves, and deprive ourselves of the serenity that God wants us to experience.

Let us understand and be assured of God's unconditional love, so we can feel that love as we face ourselves as we really are and admit some of our faults, especially those that make us consider ourselves superhuman, or something other than who God wants us to be.

We have to realize that we are limited. We are not perfect. We are not as good or powerful or intelligent as we would like to be. We have faults and failings and limitations. Some we can change; some we can't. We should try to do the best we can in our daily actions, but we must remind ourselves that our best is – and always will be -- imperfect. Success comes from a series of actions done as well as we can. Some of these actions will at times seem to be failures.

The following prayer is full of practical advice. "God, give me the knowledge of what I can do and what I cannot do, and the wisdom to know the difference." Any wonder why it is called the Serenity Prayer?

To enjoy peace of mind, we must be willing to face our limitations and accept them fearlessly. St. Francis de Sales tells us in the Introduction to the Devout Life: "We should not be disturbed by our imperfections, since for us our perfection consists in fighting against them. How can we overcome them unless we face them... fortunately for us, in this war, we are always victorious, provided we fight."

We have to remember that God created us, and God knows us and God loves us and God will never give us more than we can handle. That is our strength and our security. God will not give us more than we can handle. We have to believe that. And if we are trying to do God's will each day, God will give us all we need to do what serves God as well as others. This is the pathway to spiritual serenity.

If we will try to do God's will, trusting in God's help, God's love and care, we can limit our unrealistic expectations of ourselves, and take away the pressure and worry that they cause us; and save ourselves a lot of frustration and discouragement, and find some real peace and serenity in our lives.

This is also true of our expectations of others. If we expect too much of others, our family, our wife or husband, or our children, our job, our boss, our employees, even of God; if we expect too much of others, we will be unnecessarily disappointed.

We must remember that everyone has faults, but they have good points, too. We have to be able to see the good and forgive the faults, as God sees the good in us and at the same time forgives us.

It is said by St. Francis de Sales that every person has some imperfection no matter how holy he/she might be, and some perfection, no matter how wicked. Created in the image of God, from God comes all the goodness that he/she has.

Let us ask our Lord to help us to face our limitations fearlessly, trusting in God's goodness and love, and ask God help to correct those we can and accept ourselves as God made us and try to become more what God wants us to be. With God's help we can make progress and come to feel more of the peace Christ came to bring.

Let us pray...

Lord, help me to accept myself as You made me and try to become more what you want me to be.

St. Francis de Sales, pray for us.

The Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity

Step III. *We humbly ask God to give us in our every day life: (1) Courage to make mistakes; (2) Have a sense of humor; (3) Patience to be satisfied with small gains; (4) The ability to bear discomfort.*

In this step we ask God to help us to handle some of the hard realities of life, like, for example, the fact that we are not perfect. It might be hard to accept at first, but it is true. We are not perfect. We make mistakes, but we don't like to admit it. We like to find excuses and blame others, my parents, my husband or wife, my size, my background; anyone but me. It is so ridiculous that it is funny, and you know, that is one of the best ways to handle this difficulty.

Have a sense of humor. Don't take yourself too seriously. You don't have to be perfect. Christ said that He came to call sinners, not the self-righteous. This is a point Jesus made over and over again in the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son, the Publican and the Pharisee. Really, the one to be pitied is the self-righteous person who claims that he or she has no faults. That is really an unfortunate state, because if we deny we need God's help, we deprive ourselves of the help we need.

If we have any sense at all, we have to admit that we are not perfect. We have to admit our mistakes and even laugh at them. This ability to laugh at ourselves is an important ingredient of our mental, social, physical and spiritual health. If we can bring ourselves to laugh at our troubles -- instead of getting mad at ourselves and making mountains out of molehills -- we can keep things in perspective, and gain control over our emotions, maintaining our peace of mind and heart, and spiritual serenity.

The second thing is that we need to be satisfied with small gains. We can't expect to change over night, all at once. Indeed some of the great saints had instant conversions, but for most of us it is a long, slow and time-consuming process. Most of our bad habits and attitudes have developed over a period of time and have been quite ingrained over the

years, so they can't be changed all at once. But we can change the direction in which we want to go. That is what is really important. We have to want to get better, and put ourselves in the right direction, but we have to be satisfied with small gains.

Remember, excessive expectations bring disappointments. We must guard against discouragement. When we are making progress, we are getting better and that is what is important.

The third thing in this step is developing the will to do what we should, not just what we feel like doing. As you know, the less we do, the less we want to do. We have to force ourselves at times to do what we should, even when we don't feel like doing it. We have to realize that there are a lot of things in life that we don't like to do but must be done. We can't just do whatever we like doing. So we have to force ourselves at times to do what we don't feel like doing. We must force ourselves to move our muscles to do a task we don't feel we can do. We have to break the power of emotional inactivity by acquiring the will to do by asking God to help us to do what we can.

Remember that feelings are not facts and so we can dialogue with and work through our feelings and become a stronger and better and happier person by doing the right thing that God wants us to do. And God is always ready to help us and give us what we need to do God's will. And so we must pray that we will know and love doing what God wants, even when we do not understand why.

Then, finally, the fourth part of this step is that we ask God for the will to bear discomfort.

We all know that not everything in life is peaches and cream. There are some things in life that are very difficult and uncomfortable, and we all have a certain fear about things that cause pain or discomfort, and we try to avoid them.

However, when it comes to the question of fear, we have to ask ourselves, "Is there any real danger here?" There are some things that are truly dangerous, and we should try to avoid them. They can be physically dangerous to our health and well being, like drug abuse or drunk driving or playing with guns, and they should be feared and seriously avoided. Or they can be emotionally or morally or spiritually dangerous to the life and

health of the soul and our relationship to God, self, and others, and to our peace of mind and heart. These things also should be feared and avoided because of the real harm they can do to our moral and emotional well being.

However, if there is no real danger attached to the thing we are afraid of, like work; some of us fear work like a plague. If there is no real danger, then we have to force ourselves through the discomfort we feel and accomplish the task that we feared. By this, we conquer our fear and gain confidence and courage and a new sense of accomplishment and self worth. And we grow in self-respect and peace with God, ourselves and others, and that is what is most important in life.

Let us pray...

Lord, give us courage to pay the price of Your peace by doing Your will.

St. Francis de Sales, pray for us.

The Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity

Step IV. *We believe that God made us to work for others. Our difficulties come from concentrating too much on ourselves. Moreover, what we do for others, we do for God and, thus, thank God for all He has done for us.*

When we ask ourselves what is the most important factor in determining our spiritual serenity and peace of mind and heart, it is basically our relationships with God, self, and others. These are our most basic relationships, with God, self, and others. And that is what is really important in determining our peace of mind and heart and soul.

The first step dealt basically with our relationship to God, our need for God and our dependence on God and our trust in God's loving care.

The second and third steps dealt mostly with our relationship to ourselves, our acceptance of ourselves (even with our faults and limitations), and our efforts to become better.

This fourth step starts to deal with our relationship to others, by emphasizing that we are made to serve others. That is, in the Christian's perspective of life in this world, people are to love and care for and help and serve each other. That is God's plan for the people of this world and the peace and happiness of the peoples and nations of the world. We believe that we are made by God to serve others. God made us to work for others, and so that is what we have to do to be happy.

Christ taught this in so many ways by what He said and by what He did. Jesus said, "The Son of Man has come not to be served, but to "serve." Jesus spent his whole public life largely in the service of others, helping and healing, and giving himself for others, even to his death on the cross.

Jesus told the apostles at the Last Supper, after washing their feet, "What I have done is an example to you."

One of Christ's basic messages that he came to teach us was that we are made to serve. We are made to love and we show that love by service to others.

One of the most basic principles of morality is that a thing must perform the purpose for which it was made if it is going to have any real value or meaningful existence. And that applies to most anything: a car, a bike, or a watch, or anything else; to have a value, it must fulfill the purpose for which it was made. But it applies especially to us as human beings, whose sense of self-worth is so important to our mental health and spiritual serenity.

This is a truth that many of us know well from experience. If we look back on our lives, we know that some of our happiest moments are when we are doing something for someone else, especially those we love and those in need. And our most unhappy times are when we have been selfish, so selfish as to hurt or offend others, especially those we love. Selfishness is self-destructive.

We are social beings, interdependent upon and with others. God created us that way. We need others and others need us, especially our friendship. So when we are thinking and doing for others, our mental and emotional machinery is operating as it should. On the other hand, when we allow ourselves to get all upset emotionally, it is usually because we are paying too much attention to ourselves. We do this especially by worrying about past mistakes. Why we made them and what others might think of us. How many unhappy hours and even days have we caused ourselves by worrying about past mistakes?

We have all made mistakes. Many of us have made some serious ones, and we seem to like to go over that stuff to figure out why we made them. Most of us can't figure out why. Only a competent psychologist can do that, and most of them are not sure either. But that is a trap that we have to avoid, being too concerned about mistakes of the past. You know the saying, "One day at a time. Yesterday is history, and tomorrow is a mystery. All we have is today."

If we try to do God's will each day and avoid what is not His will, most things work out okay in the long run. We come to understand our past in a new way; we are better prepared for what the future may hold.

That is the other trap to be avoided in regard to self, worrying about the future. We have to plan, but we know that the only one who can really control the future is God. And we have to believe that if we are trying to

do God's will, we can trust in God's help, and know that God will not give us more than we can handle. That is our strength and our security. God will not give us more than we can handle each day.

Think about it. When we look back at all the things that God got us through, things we never thought we could do, God helped us through them. God will always help us and give us what we need, one day at a time. The more we can trust in God's loving care, the more God can take away our worry and our fear and give us the peace and security we seek. St. Francis de Sales tells us: "The same God who took care of us yesterday will take care of us today and tomorrow."

And so, when we feel ourselves getting anxious and worried and upset about things, we need to realize that maybe we are paying too much attention to ourselves. The answer is to get out of ourselves and start thinking more about others and their problems, and our own problems become less of a burden. And try not to project. What if this happens? What if that happens? We can worry about a lot of things that never happen. Whatever happens, when it happens, God will give us the strength to handle it. Otherwise, we can worry about many things that never happen.

We need to remember that we are made to serve others. When we fail to serve others, we can get all full of ourselves and become selfish, self-absorbed, worried, anxious and miserable. But when we try to think of others and help them, we are fulfilling the purpose for which God made us, and we become a kinder and happier and more pleasant person to be with.

People will like us more and treat us more kindly as Christ wants them to, and we will find the peace and serenity that Christ wants us to have.

Let us pray...

Lord, help me to serve You by serving others.

St. Francis de Sales, pray for us.

The Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity

Step V. *We humbly ask God to help us: (1) To avoid concentrating on any real or imaginary wrong done to us by others, and; (2) A void remaining angry, resentful, impatient or disgusted with others.*

This step deals with one of the most important aspects of mental health and spiritual serenity: our relationship with others, especially how we handle offenses we suffer from others. We have been told many times that God made us to love and serve Him by loving and serving others. But we know from experience that few of us ever come to realize this goal fully or completely on this earth, and so life for us has a lot of selfishness and impoliteness and down right rudeness in it. We have offended others and others have offended us. The way we handle those offenses we have received, is an important part of our mental health and spiritual serenity.

We know how such offenses have so often caused us so much anger and mental anguish at times and deprived us of the peace and serenity that God wants us to have, and we want to have. Nothing is as detrimental to mental health and peace of mind as impatience, anger and resentment towards others who have offended us in the past.

We are encouraged here not to concentrate on past offenses; not to dwell on them. We have all been offended in the past, some much more seriously than others, but all of us have been offended. Most of these offenses are not that important. We can't even remember what got us upset three days ago. Because yesterday something else happened and we forgot that, and today something else happened and we forgot, about that. So, most of these things are really not that important. The thing is that, the more we think about something, the worse it gets, and some little darn thing that is really not that important can become a big problem, way out of perspective and cause us a lot of anger and unhappiness.

When we are angry, we don't hurt the person who is the object of our anger. We only hurt ourselves, and deprive ourselves of the peace and happiness that God wants us to have. The only answer is, as Christ told

Peter, "Forgive, not seven times but seventy times seven times." As often as is necessary.

Christ also told us that unless we are willing to forgive others, His Father won't forgive us. And we pray in the Lord's Prayer for the Father to forgive us, "... as we forgive those who trespass against us." And so when we fail to forgive others, we prevent God, our Father, from forgiving us, and so deprive ourselves of the peace that God wants us to have that is so important to our mental health and serenity of soul.

We are told in AA that we cannot afford to have anger or resentment because it can so easily lead us back to drink, and we know how true that is.

We might say or think that it is too hard to forgive. We might feel that we can't forgive. We may not be able to control our feelings of anger against a person, but we can control our actions and our words and desires, and so we turn to God and ask His help to forgive the person and to help them to be better. Feelings are not facts and so we can act against our feelings. The big thing here is not to concentrate on these real or imaginary wrongs done to us by others, not to dwell on them. Again, with God's help, we can control our will and our intellect and our thoughts.

There are five factors that are involved in our emotional difficulties: sensations, feelings, imagination, intellect and will. The first three, the sensations, feelings, and imagination, cannot be controlled directly, but we can control the intellect and the will. If we can control the will to control the thoughts and the intellect, we can control the imagination, the feelings and the sensations. So we have to want to avoid thinking of things that will set off the imagination and upset our emotions. We need strength of will that comes from God's grace, which comes from prayer. That is why faith in God's grace is so important. We must pray for strength of will that comes from prayer.

Another big help is to have a sense of humor so as not to take ourselves too seriously, and not to take others too seriously either, especially when they are upset. Many people say things they don't really mean when they are upset; things they are sorry about later. So we can't take what they say seriously. If we do, we can allow ourselves to be hurt

by something that was not really meant at all, and maybe lose a good friend and cause ourselves a lot of sorrow and loneliness and grief.

If we dwell on unhappy events of the past, when we have been offended by others, we can cause ourselves so much unhappiness, and build up resentment about things that are long over and deprive ourselves of peace with God and others and cause ourselves much loneliness and unhappiness.

If we will realize that no one is perfect. Everyone has faults and failings, but they have good points, too. If we will see the good and forgive the failings, as God forgives us, we can maintain more friendly relationships with others and find peace with others and ourselves, the peace that Christ came to bring and the peace that God wants us to have.

Let us pray...

Lord, help me to forgive others that your Father may forgive me and give me peace.

St. Francis de Sales, pray for us.

The Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity

Step VI. *We ask God to give us a sense of security in our daily living by trusting in the power of His love for us. Thus, we will not be unduly disturbed by or give into feelings of discouragement, preoccupation with ourselves, embarrassment, worry, sense of shame, inadequacy or hopelessness.*

This sixth step goes back to our relationship to ourselves, and deals with some of the major dangers to our self-respect and self-confidence, those things that are so important to our spiritual peace and serenity. It lists them there right off the bat, some of the real dangers to our emotional health and spiritual serenity: Discouragement, which is something that all of us are familiar with at times. It feels like the whole world is on our shoulders, and we will never make it. Did you ever feel like that?

Then there is preoccupation with ourselves. Everything depends on me. It is all on me. What we call tunnel thinking.

Embarrassment. That feeling of wanting to die, after making a mistake that everyone must have seen.

Then worry. Oh boy. What if this happens? What if that happens?

Sense of shame. How could I ever have done that? I am not good, enough to love, or even to live.

Inadequacy. I could never do that. That is much too hard for me.

Hopelessness. Nothing can help me. I am beyond all hope or help.

All these depressing ideas. It makes us depressed just going over the list. And yet I can identify with everyone of them, at some time during my life of craziness.

And they really are crazy, because they are unrealistic. None of these ideas is true for us. And thank God, we have in this step the key to avoid being destroyed by these devastating ideas. That is, to ask God, our all good and loving God, Who knows and controls what is going on out there, to give us a sense of security in our daily living. That is really the key to mental health and spiritual serenity, a sense of security through trust in God.

How do we get that sense of trust? We, who have made so many mistakes, have failed in so many things, who have messed up so many times? We no longer trust even ourselves. We have to turn to the power of God. We believe in an all good and loving God, Who is all powerful. Who really controls what is going on out there. And we believe God knows everything we have done, and God still loves us because God loves us unconditionally. God doesn't love us because we are good. God loves us as we are, with all our faults and failings, - and there is nothing we can do to keep God from loving us.

That is what Christ came to teach us. That is why Christ suffered and died for us, to show us how much God loves us, how much God despises the sin that keeps us from Him and messes up our lives. But we have to trust God; trust in God's love for us, that God will never give us more than we can handle. If we trust in God and try to do God's will, it is going to be okay in the long run.

It is trust in the power of God's love that is the key to the strength and security we need to live life will all its ups and downs. It is trust in the power of God's love that belies the powerful temptations that threaten to shake our self-confidence and self-acceptance and spiritual serenity. It is trust in the power of God's love that gives us the strength and security we need to rise above our human weakness and our mistakes of the past, to bind up the wounds of our sins and transcend our limitations and reach out to begin a new effort to set things straight.

We have to turn to the Lord. We cannot do it without God. We must turn to Him with hearts open to His help. We have to want to do His will. That is what is most important. We start with that desire and allow Him to make it happen. He needs our cooperation. If we will turn our will over to Him with the desire to make our will His will, He will give us whatever we need to do His will each day; one day at a time, but all we have is now. So we have to stop bemoaning the mistakes of the past and stop worrying about the future, and start wanting to do God's will now, each moment of the day. Discouragement cannot destroy us. God gives us courage to overcome discouragement.

God's will is not just about ourselves, but what we can do for others.

Embarrassment comes from our inordinate concern about what people think of us. If we try to please people all the time, that can really drive us crazy. They are so fickle anyhow. You can be the greatest person around one day and rejected the next. We see that in sports all the time. One bad game and they forget everything that happened before. What people think, especially strangers, is ultimately not the most important standard of our self-worth: it is what God thinks that is really important. If we have peace with God, we can handle the rest. And if we don't have peace with God, then we can't handle anything, and everything drives us crazy. And there is a lot of craziness in us and around us.

We can find ourselves trapped in a vicious circle. Anger against others is followed by anger against ourselves. We feel our weakness and grow insecure. Discouragement sets in because of repeated failures. We concentrate on these failures. We become embarrassed. We worry and have a sense of shame. We feel inadequate and at times hopeless. This insecurity puts us on the defensive and so we start to blame others. But blaming others is not the answer.

We must admit that we are dependent on God, a power greater than ourselves, an all good and loving Father. That is what Christ taught us. We must humbly turn to that good and loving Father, trusting in God's love for us, and ask God's help to admit our mistakes and bear the discomfort of our emotional upheaval, and trust in His help to do whatever is His will for us.

When it comes to regaining our sense of security through trust in God, we have to take a look at our mistakes of the past; and, if they have been serious enough to disrupt our relationship with God and cause us to feel alienated from God. If we have been a lifestyle that is incompatible with God's will, then there is need for a radical conversion. That means a need to admit the unlawfulness of the behavior and the destructive nature of its effects on our life.

We have to admit the causal connection between the unlawful lifestyle and the sorry unhappy state of our mind and soul. We must realize that if we select to choose a sinful lifestyle (drinking and drugging and stealing and all the rest of it), we must be willing to pay the price. And everything has a price. That's reality. There is a price to pay for doing

what is right, but there is a much bigger price to pay for doing what is wrong. Once we can see the connection between what we are doing and the unhappy condition we are in, then we can turn the direction of our will. That is what is crucially important; we must want to do what is right, what is God's will for us. We may not be able to do it for a while, but we must want to do it.

By God's grace, we can change our will, even if we don't feel like it. Feelings are not facts, and so we can act against our feelings with God's help; and so prayer is very important... prayer and faith in God's love. We must believe that God loves us no matter what we have done. We must trust that His will is really the best for us, and pray with faith that He will help us to want to do His will each day.

Once we have opened our heart to God's will, God can really help us. Here, again, it is important to concentrate on the present moment. If we start to project what we have to do in the future, we can be over whelmed and discouraged and not even try. Because we might not have today what we will need tomorrow. But when tomorrow comes, we will have it then, and God will help us.

For most of us, hopefully, we have already gone through that radical conversion, and our battles are against our daily faults and weakness, especially those that caused harm to others. We go through a similar process with each of the faults we find in our inventory as we examine our conscience.

We identify the fault and admit it, acknowledging it as our own fault. We try to see the causes and consequences to self and our relationship to God and others. And ask God for the grace to know and do His will, in all these situations in the future, trying to keep things in perspective so we don't over react and lose our peace with God and self and others, because that is more precious than anything else.

If serious sin and especially a sinful lifestyle are involved, then we as Catholics must seek sacramental absolution to restore our peace with God and gain the grace of the sacraments to maintain our peace with God in the future. St. Francis says that prayer and the sacraments are the two great means of getting the grace to do God's will. If there is a marriage situation that prevents a sacramental confession and absolution, then we

have to pray that God will give us strength to continue to want to do His will; and prayer has to take on an even greater role in your life to keep your faith alive. Because, if you begin to neglect Mass and prayer because you can't receive Communion, you are probably going to lose your faith altogether. We tend to believe as we live. If we live the Faith, we have no trouble believing it. If we don't live it, we can find all kinds of reasons for not believing it.

But each of us has to trust in God's mercy and love, and ask His help each day to keep things in perspective and to humbly acknowledge our faults and failings and try to avoid them in the future while not expecting too much of Him or of ourselves. We are not perfect, at least not yet. God isn't finished with us yet. And not to take ourselves too seriously. We have to learn to laugh at our mistakes. That helps to keep things in perspective. Remember, if we expect too much of anyone, we are going to be disappointed.

We need to turn to God and ask God's help to start again to try to follow God's will each day, each hour, and each minute. God will give us what we need to gain the courage and confidence we need to have a sense of humor and a sense of security that will allow us to function like normal people, and maintain our peace with God and self and others, and find the spiritual serenity that God wants us to have.

Let us pray...

Lord, help me to feel the power of Your love, to do Your will and gain Your peace.

St. Francis de Sales, pray for us.

The Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity

Step VII. *We ask God to help us to understand clearly how serving Him by serving others makes our lives nobler and happier. To this end, we promise, through prayer and meditation, to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understand Him, through Christ and His Church, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry it out.*

This is the step that helps us to keep things in perspective, that is, to see things as they really are, which really means to see things as God sees them, because God sees things as they really are. In other words, we have to try to see things from God's point of view. We have to try to gain God's perspective of the things in our lives, and our world.

We can do this only by establishing a conscious contact with God. We have to constantly communicate with Him. This conscious contact with God's power and love gives us a sense of security and strength that is necessary for mental health and spiritual serenity.

This conscious contact and communication with God is commonly called prayer, but it is not merely a matter of saying a set formula of words. It is above all the continuous uniting of our intellect and will with God's, making God's will our will. We cannot change God's will; we can only change our will. For spiritual serenity, we have to develop the habit of making a contact with God by thinking of Him and trying to get His view of our lives and our world. We need God's viewpoint of our lives. We have to see things as they really are-as God sees them. We need to acquire God's perspective of our lives.

At first, we might rebel against this dependence on God. Sometimes, we don't want to be dependent on anyone. We want to be free... free to do or say anything we want.

This is what happened in the sixties when the young people rebelled against the war in Vietnam. And they found they were right about the war, and then they wanted to reject all authority, state, Church, even parents.

Divine freedom requires responsibility, the ability to do the right thing. If you want to be truly free, we need to take responsibility for what

we think, feel and do, without being forced. If we reject responsibility and refuse to do the right thing on our own, we end up losing our freedom. If we deny our dependence on God that we need to be truly free, we are only kidding ourselves. Dependence on God is a fact that we cannot deny any more than an infant can deny his/her dependence on others.

How do we get a practical knowledge of our dependence on God, and knowledge of God's will for us? We don't get it by simply kneeling down and asking God for it. The sense of dependence comes gradually. It is a process of slow growth. Day by day we turn to God and ask Him to improve our conscious contact with Him. God is patient with our slow progress, and we must be patient, too.

But the thing is, we have to want to know and love and do God's will, trusting that God's will is really the best for us. We must trust in God's love for us despite what we have done in the past. We must open our hearts to God, and allow God to help us to know and do God's will.

What is God's will for us?

God made us to work for others. Jesus told us to love one another as He loves us. Jesus taught us by his life and by his words that we are to show our love for God by serving others.

Jesus told His apostles at the Last Supper, after He had washed their feet, "What I have done is an example to you that you should do for one another." Christ's whole life of ministry was one of prayer to the Father and service to others. And it is psychologically sound that, since God created us to work for others, our emotions and imagination, intellect and actions will stay in balance if we put them at the service of others, especially those with whom we live.

If we look back on our lives, we see that our happiest moments are when we are doing for others. And, on the contrary, if we are having emotional trouble, it is because we are concentrating too much on ourselves. We are narrowing our outlook to our own little world; and that is very small, and very dangerous to our mental health and our peace of mind and heart, the peace that Christ came to bring, and the peace that God wants us to share with others.

Let us pray...

Lord, help me to know and love and do Your will in my life that I may be at peace with You and feel Your love.

St. Francis de Sales, pray for us.

The Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity

Step VIII. *We humbly ask God for the courage and strength and will to live as normal people by serving God and our fellow persons; especially those God has placed close to us, and to reject all feelings of nervous fatigue.*

This step is like the action half of the last step. There we asked God to help us to understand our purpose to serve others, to help us to understand that that is why God made us, to serve God by serving others.

In this step, we humbly ask God for the courage and strength and will to actually do it, to do things for others. And so here in this eighth step we are trying to establish and maintain our conscious contact with God, so we can see His plan for our world and our part in it, and to gain the strength and courage to carry it out.

So we again humbly acknowledge our dependence on God so God can give us the strength and courage and will to do what He wants of us. And to realize that God's will is really the best and healthiest way for us to act, and to resist all feelings of fear or nervous fatigue.

This humble dependence on God is important to remove our fear of failure in our activity. Once we realize that the success of our effort is much more dependent on God than on us, it takes the pressure off us and gives us courage to try with God's help to do what He wants us to do.

Then we have to be humble enough to admit our dependence on others, especially those with whom we live. This dependence on others is normal and natural and necessary for maintaining our sanity and our serenity. To desire to be completely independent and autonomous, from everyone is unnatural, and it is what creates so much frustration and failure in our lives. (I don't need you. I can do it all myself.) How foolish that is. It is like trying to be perfect all the time. It's tough trying to be perfect all the time.

We do need the help of others for most things in life. God made us social beings. Dependence on others is the way that leads to normal and successful living. Mental health and peace of mind come from a

willingness to be dependent upon and interdependent with others, putting ourselves at their service.

This is a most difficult lesson to learn in today's world where there is so much pressure to be 'number one,' to be the best. "I am the best and the heck with the rest," is the cry of our culture that we hear so often today. And it is so destructive, destructive to ourselves, our peace of mind and heart,' and destructive to the community and our society, because it continues to pit groups against one another; men against women, young against old, rich against poor, white against black...it goes on and on. We all need one another to become what God wants us to be.

How do we get the power to resist the pressures of the world that are constantly being blasted at us by the media in all its forms, from movies to magazines to TV? How do we lift ourselves out of our discouragement and depression to accept ourselves with our limitations and failures, to gain a new perspective of our goals and expectations, to see ourselves as God sees us, as we really are in God's sight and to have hope in a better future? How do we get that?

Again it comes from our conscious contact with the power greater than ourselves, from our contact with God as our loving Father, as Christ taught us. Who loves us despite our faults and failings, who sent His Son to redeem us from our sins and from our sinfulness? God loves us as only the best of fathers can. At every moment God wants only the best for us. We have to believe that. That is our strength and our security. But we have to trust God. Only we can stop God from helping us.

Once we have had professional help, if that is necessary, then we ourselves must want to work, with God's help, to avoid making ourselves nervous and upset. Others can annoy us, but they cannot make us lose complete control. God will not give us more than we can handle, if we keep things in perspective and try to have a sense of humor. It is all passing away, you know.

Others can ignore us and hurt us, but they cannot make us dwell on resentments. That is our own doing. It is said that nervous people frequently tell themselves that they cannot control their emotions. Actually, what they mean is that they do not want to do so. It is said that

when nervous persons talk about their emotions, the words, "I cannot," usually mean, "I do not want to."

Actually, emotionally disturbed persons can gain control of their emotions if they really want to. What we have to realize is, the price of being depressed is worse than the price of recovery. They both have difficulties and hardships, but we have to compare the pain and suffering, the worry and anxiety and fear of being depressed to the blessings of peace and happiness of recovery.

We must ask God's help to know that God loves us, despite our faults and failings of the past, God loves us and to feel the power of God's love that makes up for our weakness and gives us strength and courage to do what He wants us to do.

We recall the emptiness of our depressed lives with false fears of things that never happen, with wasted worry about a lot of things that are long over. We have to compare that with the peace of mind and heart, the joy and happiness that comes from accomplishing each small thing for God and others; making others happy for love of God. That is God's will for us.

By dwelling on the benefits of being God's instrument of service to others, we can-with His help-change our will to become God's will as He helps us to help others for love of Him, and find the peace and happiness and serenity He wants us to have.

Let us pray...

Lord, help me to trust in the power of Your love to help me to know and love and do Your will by serving others for love of You.

St. Francis de Sales, pray for us.

The Salesian Steps to Spiritual Serenity

Step IX. *We accept our emotional suffering and thank God for it and offer it to God as the best way of helping those whom we love.*

In this final step we try to gain a better understanding and appreciation of our condition of having strong emotions and so put it in perspective so that it can be more of a blessing that helps us rather than a burden that hurts.

First of all, we have to realize that these strong emotions are a permanent part of our personality that cannot be changed by a diet as if it were a faulty figure, or by plastic surgery as if it were a large nose. You know that if one has a fat figure, he can go on a diet and change it. Or if one has a crooked nose, he can have some surgery to improve it. Not so with the emotions; once we have them, that is it forever-for good or for bad. And there is nothing wrong with having strong emotions. In fact, they are a blessing, a special gift. Almost all great artists are high strung. They have sensitivity so keen that they can see and picture life as others less emotionally gifted cannot. But we have to learn to control our emotions, and use them to give us the energy we need to accomplish good for others.

The tiny atom is a terrific physical powerhouse of energy. If this power is let loose without control, it can destroy cities; but if it is controlled and used well, it can make ships sail under and over water for months without refueling. It can run generators that produce heat to warm houses in cold weather and do so many other good things.

We have strong emotions for a very definite reason: to help those with whom we live. For example, it is our emotions that give us the special energy we need to react to certain situations: anger to fight, fear to flight, to protect ourselves or those we love.

Ordinarily, a high strung man or woman hates to be called a neurotic. And there is some justification for this reaction. A neurotic is an emotional person who has poor control of his strong emotions. We can stop being neurotic, not by ridding ourselves of our highly sensitive emotions, but by gaining control over them and by using them as a source

of power and strength to help others. And so, we have to realize that these strong emotions are a gift from God that He gives us for a good purpose, to help us to do what He wants us to do. But like all of God's gifts, they have to be used according to His will to help us do for others. If we allow them to cause too much attention to ourselves, they become the source of anxiety, fear, worry, and frustration.

If we direct our emotions to concern for others, they can be the source of power and strength to do the things God wants us to do in making the world a better place to live and promoting the Kingdom of God on earth.

Each of us was made by God in a special way to play a particular part in God's plan for the salvation of the world. If we have strong emotions, God has given them to us to help us to play our part in spreading God's peace in our world and so to find the peace God wants us to have that brings us spiritual serenity.

Let us pray...

Lord, help me to accept and love myself as You made me for love of You. Allow me to do Your will and find Your peace and spread that peace to others.

St. Francis de Sales pray for us.