

Spirituality Matters 2016: January 7th - January 13th

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(January 7, 2016: Raymond of Penafort, Priest)

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“If anyone says, ‘I love God’, but hates his brother, he is a liar...”

In a sermon, Francis de Sales observed:

“The Commandment to love the neighbor is new, then, for the reason just given; that is, because Our Lord came to renew it, indicating that He wished it to be better observed than it had ever been before. It is new also because it is as if the Savior had resuscitated it, just as we can call a man a new man who has been restored to life from death. The Commandment has been so neglected that it must have seemed never to have been given inasmuch as there were so few who remembered it, to say nothing of those who practiced it. Thus, Our Lord gave it again. And He wants it to be as if it were a new thing, a new Commandment, one that is practiced faithfully and fervently...He wants it so renewed so that everybody should love one another.” (Living Jesus, p. 249-250)

We can never be reminded enough of this “new” Commandment that Jesus preached in word and in deed: “Love one another, as I have loved you.” To observe this Commandment is to live in the truth. Of course, Jesus’ “new” Commandment also infers that if you claim to love God while hating your brother (or sister), you are a liar.

And there’s absolutely nothing new about that!

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(January 8, 2016: Christmas Weekday)

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“You have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God...”

In his book The Spirit of Love, C.F. Kelley wrote:

“If the divine humanism of St. Francis de Sales did not specialize in theology, to what, then, did it give attention? Indeed, if it must be said to have specialized in anything at all, then sure it was the praising of all the divine aspects of human nature. He taught that the abuse of human instincts is the only thing about which we need to be ashamed: we should not be ashamed of our humanity. Rather than speculate about God he preferred to glorify the divinity of man. Instead of thinking about original sin, he thought about redemption. Instead of thinking about punishment, he thought about eternal life. Instead of thinking about grace for the elect, he thought about grace for all. Instead of thinking about God in the head, he thought about God in the heart. Nevertheless, his divine humanism had its opponents: not only Calvinists and Lutherans, Naturalists, Idealists and philosophical skeptics, but others less extreme who emphasized the misery of fallen nature, or others who were afraid of holding man in high esteem for fear of inviting him to somehow dispense with God. Francis de Sales was devoid of this kind of fear. After all, how can someone fear something about which he is not thinking or at which he is not looking? Those who are in love with God and the things of God have raised themselves to where they no longer think or look. They simply love.” (Select Salesian Subjects, p. 115, 0496.)

Note that John uses the present tense in addressing us. He tells us that we ‘have’ eternal life. Rather than presuming that eternal life is reserved solely for the next life, John suggests that eternal life is already available to us in this life. How might we access that eternal life here and now? As Francis de Sales suggests, eternal life

has a great deal to do with how we think about this life. Eternal life has a great deal to do with what we think about – what we focus upon – in this life. Eternal life has a great deal to do with love, and little – or nothing – to do with fear.

How can we experience eternal life already? By loving God, by loving the things of God and – most importantly – by loving the people of God.

Perhaps, beginning with ourselves!

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(January 9, 2016: Christmas Weekday)

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“Be on your guard against idols...”

“**Idolatry**” is a pejorative term for the worship of an idol, a physical object such as a cult image, as a god or practices believed to verge on worship, such as giving undue honor and regard to created forms other than God. In all the Abrahamic religions idolatry is strongly forbidden, although views as to what constitutes idolatry may differ within and between them. In other religions the use of cult images is accepted, although the term ‘idolatry’ is unlikely to be used within the religion, being inherently disapproving. Which images, ideas, and objects constitute idolatry is often a matter of considerable contention, and within all the Abrahamic religions the term may be used in a very wide sense, with no implication that the behavior objected to actually consists of the religious worship of a physical object. In addition, theologians have extended the concept to include giving undue importance to aspects of religion other than God, or to non-religious aspects of life in general, with no involvement of images specifically. For example, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: ‘Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods, or demons (for example Satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc.’” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idolatry>)

Odds are slim that any of us actually worship craven images in our homes, offices or places of worship. However, there are other ways of practicing idolatry. What might we be tempted to worship in this life? The list might include: our time, our talents, our opinions, our way of doing or seeing things, our appearance, our popularity or our plans!

Today, be on your guard against idols...whatever they may be!

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(January 10, 2016: Baptism of the Lord)

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“Jesus went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.”

“God is so good that he never ceases to work in our hearts to draw us out of ourselves, out of vain and perishable things, so that we can receive his grace and give ourselves wholly to him.” (Saint Jane de Chantal)

Today, we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of Jesus. The Baptism of Jesus marks his inauguration into his public life. Isaiah in the first reading gives the blueprint for ministry for Jesus. As Isaiah writes, “I will put my spirit upon him and he will bring forth justice to the nations. I have formed you.....to open the eyes of the blind, to bring prisoners from confinement and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.”

We know from the life of Jesus as recorded in the Scriptures, he fulfilled the blueprint Isaiah had written. He reached out to the marginalized, cured those who were sick, touched those who were believed “untouchable,”

challenged his religious leaders to “do what they preached,” and was constantly traveling doing good works. With all the good that he accomplished for others, he was crucified. In the words of today’s Gospel, he was that “beloved Son in whom the Father was well pleased.”

In celebrating the feast of the Baptism of Jesus, we also celebrate our own Baptism. Just as the Baptism of Christ inaugurated his public life, so also our own Baptism inaugurates us into the Christian life. Christ gave us an example in his life to allow us to see how those who were baptized into him can live His life. St. Jane tells us, “God never ceases to work in our hearts to draw us out of ourselves so we can receive his grace and give ourselves wholly to him.” The reading from Acts tells us that “Jesus went about doing good and healing all those oppressed with the devil, for God was with him.”

To live our lives as followers of Christ we also should “go out of ourselves” and “go about doing good” and bringing Christ’s healing presence and his peace to those whom the Lord sends our way. Like Christ, we too should visit the sick and reach out to the marginalized in our communities and in our families. We should speak with those toward whom we have had negative feelings or painful memories: anyone that we might consider ‘untouchable’, anyone at home, in the neighborhood or at work who we avoid, ignore or even despise.

We need to be people who put into identifiable action our profession of being a follower of Christ. This action requires strength and courage. Just as the Father was with the Son in his life, so also we have the presence of Christ within our minds and hearts to give us the strength and courage we need to be his authentic followers.

Today, let us then come out of ourselves and our own little worlds to see what good we can do and how we, relying on the strength of the Lord within us, might be agents of the Lord’s healing presence to all those around us.

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(January 11, 2016: Monday, First Week in Ordinary Time)

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“They left their nets and followed him...They left their father along with the hired men and followed him.”

The word *left* (used twice in today’s Gospel) is, of course, a form of the verb *leave*, defined as “(1) to go out of or away from; (2) to depart from permanently; quit: to leave a job; (3) to let remain or have remaining behind after going, disappearing, ceasing; (4) to allow to remain in the same place, condition, etc; (5) to let stay or be as specified.”

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, encounters with God almost always seem to involve people “leaving” something, somewhere or someone. Adam and Eve left Eden; Abraham and Sarah left their homeland; Noah left dry land and later left his boat; Moses and the Israelites left Egypt; Mary left in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth; the Magi left the East to follow a star; Mary, Joseph and Jesus left Bethlehem ahead of Herod’s rage, Matthew left his tax collecting post. And in today’s Gospel, Simon, Andrew, James and John left their nets, their livelihood, their families and their homes.

Be that as it may, leaving – at least, as far as God is concerned – isn’t only about walking away from something, somewhere or someone. It’s also about drawing closer to something, somewhere or someone else. Specifically, loving God – and the things of God – frequently invites us to leave that which is comfortable and familiar in order that we might experience that which is challenging and new. By most standards that’s what growth – human growth – is all about: knowing when it’s time to leave – knowing when it’s time to move on – even when what, where or who we might leave is good - sometimes, very, very good!

One of our greatest temptations in life is to stop moving, growing, changing, learning and developing. There was a time when psychologists seemed to suggest that human beings stopped growing somewhere in their twenties or thirties. Today, we know that human beings continue to grow right up until the day they die...or, at least, they are invited to do so. Leaving – as it turns out - is a part of living.

Leaving is not about doing with less. Very often, leaving is about making room for more. What, where, how or who may God be inviting us to leave today in order that we might have more life - and more love – tomorrow?

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(January 12, 2016: Tuesday, First Week in Ordinary Time)

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“He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

In today’s Gospel we hear that the people of Capernaum were “astonished” at the teaching of Jesus, for “he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes”. What distinguished the teaching of Jesus from the teaching of the scribes? How did Jesus’ “new teaching” manifest itself? Some of the differences include - but are certainly not limited to – these:

- 1) Jesus taught matters of the highest importance which are necessary for salvation. By contrast, the scribes taught trifling matters of rites and ceremonies which were passing away, such as the washing of hands and of cups.
- 2) What Christ taught in word, he fulfilled in deed. He talked the talk and walked the walk. The scribes, by contrast (as Jesus observed) spoke bold words, but exhibited few deeds.
- 3) Jesus taught with fervor and zeal, such that the words of Scripture could always be applied to him. The scribes could lay no such claims.
- 4) Jesus confirmed his teaching by miracles; the scribes could not.
- 5) The scribes were merely interpreters of the Law, whereas Christ was the embodiment of the Law and Prophets.
- 6) While the scribes sought their own glory and the praise of others, Jesus taught solely for the glory of God and for the salvation of others.
- 7) In his words and example – and also by the hidden inspirations of his grace - Jesus illuminated the minds and inflamed the hearts of his hearers. By contrast, the scribes clouded the minds and discouraged the hearts of their hearers. (<http://newtheologicalmovement.blogspot.com/2012/01/christ-taught-as-one-having-authority.html>)

When other people encounter us – especially as it relates to matters of faith, life and love – to whom do we bear a greater resemblance: the scribes or the Christ?

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(January 13, 2016: Hilary, Bishop/Doctor of the Church)

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M. Scott Peck, an American psychiatrist, wrote two books on the subject of “demons” - People of the Lie: The Hope For Healing Human Evil and Glimpses of the Devil: A Psychiatrist's Personal Accounts of Possession, Exorcism, and Redemption. Peck describes in some detail several cases involving his patients. In People of the Lie he provides identifying characteristics of an evil person, whom he classified as having a character disorder. In Glimpses of the Devil Peck goes into significant detail describing how he became interested in exorcism in order to debunk the myth of possession by evil spirits – only to be convinced otherwise after encountering two cases which did not fit into any category known to psychology or psychiatry. Peck came to the conclusion that possession was a rare phenomenon related to evil, and that possessed people are not actually evil, but rather, they are doing battle with the forces of evil. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demon>)

In today's Gospel – and all throughout the Gospels – we are told that Jesus drove out “demons” as a part of his ministry of proclaiming the power and promise of the Good News. Whether or not you believe in demons – regardless of your thoughts regarding exorcisms – we all struggle with things that plague us, that exasperate us or that appear to ‘possess’ us to the extent that they prevent us from being the people God wants and/or intends us to be. Despite our best efforts, these “demons” seem impervious to our feeble attempts at conquering, dispelling or exorcizing them. Perhaps therein lies the lesson - the greatest mistake we make in struggling with our own “demons” is to believe that we must do it alone; that we must battle with our “demons” all by ourselves.

However large, small, frequent or few they might be, are you willing to bring your “demons” to Jesus?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: January 21st - January 27th

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(January 21, 2016: Agnes, Virgin/Martyr)

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“In God I trust; I shall not fear...”

Notwithstanding the increasingly common trend of removing all things religious from the arena of public life, did you know that St. Agnes is still on the books as the patron saint of the Girl Scouts? In his book [This Saint's for You](#), Thomas Craughwell writes:

“St. Agnes was chosen because not only was she martyred when she was barely in her teens, but she also possessed many of the qualities the Girl Scouts attempt to cultivate in themselves: courage, honesty, respect for self and for others, and service to God and neighbor.”

“Agnes came from a Christian family in Rome. She was about thirteen years old when she was arrested and hauled before a magistrate for the crime of being a Christian. He threatened to burn her alive, but Agnes would not deny her faith. Next, he tried to force her to join the virgins who served the goddess Vesta, but Agnes refused to perform any function in a pagan temple. Finally, the magistrate ordered the early adolescent to be exposed in a brothel and then beheaded. Despite the fact that Agnes was but one of tens of thousands of Christians martyred during the emperor Diocletian's persecution of the Church, devotion to her sprang up and spread almost instantly after her death. In imagery and art, Agnes is frequently portrayed with a lamb, a symbol of her innocence and purity as well as a take-off on her name: in Latin, the word for ‘lamb’ is agnus.” ([This Saint's for You](#), p. 192)

Perhaps Agnes should also be portrayed with a lion in addition to a lamb. She was innocent and pure as a lamb, but she also was a lion insofar as saw God as her father, her rock and her savior, the one helped her to be courageous and tenacious...to the death.

Today, how might we imitate her example of being both a lamb – and a lion – of God?

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(January 22, 2016: Friday, Second Week in Ordinary Time)

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On this anniversary of the US Supreme Court’s decision, *Roe vs. Wade*, all dioceses in the United States are encouraged to observe a “**Day of Prayer**” for the Legal Protection of Unborn Children. It is suggested that the faithful throughout the country celebrate the Mass “*For Giving Thanks to God for the Gift of Human Life.*”

Over 400 years ago St. Francis de Sales made the following statement in his Introduction to the Devout Life: “Consider the nature God has given us. It is the highest in this visible world. It is capable of eternal life and of being perfectly united to God’s Divine Majesty.”(IDL, Part One, Chapter 9)

What is more precious – what is more profound – what is more promising – what is more powerful – than the God-given gift of life? What better way to express our gratitude for this greatest of gifts than to treat life in all its forms with profound respect and reverence from conception until natural death!

And at every single step in between!

(OR)

In his popularization of Bishop Camus’s accounts of the life and legacy of St. Francis de Sales (in The Spirit of Love) CF. Kelley wrote:

“St. Francis de Sales would often say to me (Camus) how much better it would be to accommodate ourselves to others rather than to want to bend everyone to our own ways and opinions. The human mind is like pulp, which takes readily any color with which it is mixed. The great thing is to take care that it not be like the chameleon, which, one after the other takes every color except white.”(Select Salesian Subjects, p. 122, 0523)

St. Francis de Sales’ preferred approach for evangelizing was to meet people where they lived. As his Catholic Controversies clearly demonstrate, however, the “Gentleman Saint” had no hesitation pointing out when people were doing something objectively wrong. While seeking to understand others’ ways and opinions as a strategy for winning people over, Francis never compromised his own principles or core beliefs.

The debate regarding *Roe v. Wade* and its impact in the United States shows no signs of waning. In addition, debate often denigrates into wholesale divisiveness, even *ad hominem* attacks. With this unfortunate state of affairs surrounding what is a life or death situation in mind, Jane de Chantal’s advice to a fellow Visitandine sister is especially relevant:

“I am convinced, and experience has taught me, that nothing so wins souls as gentleness and cordiality. Follow this method, for it is the spirit of our blessed Father. Curtness in words or actions only hardens hearts and depresses them, whereas gentleness encourages them and makes them receptive...” (LSD, page 247)

Discussions about how best to legally protect unborn children appear to produce little or no consensus. Arguments for and against “legislating morality” seem to have no end. In the meantime, there is nothing to be lost – and perhaps much to be gained – by continuing to pray that “liberty and justice for all” will, in fact, be just that - for all, including unborn children.

Today, may God help us to put that prayer into action with as much poignant purpose – and gentle persuasion – as we can.

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(January 23, 2016: Marianne Cope, Religious)

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“When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’”

In a perfect world, being true to yourself – being the person that God wants you to be – should be its own reward. But as even Jesus discovers in today’s Gospel, being true to yourself – being the person that God wants you to be – can bring with it some unwarranted and unwelcomed resistance and rejection.

Especially from family, friends and other loved ones!

Only three pages into his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales deals with this phenomenon head-on.

“The men who discouraged the Israelites from going into the Promised Land told them that it was a country that ‘devoured its inhabitants.’ In other words, they said that the air was so malignant it was impossible to live there for long and its natives such monsters that they ate men like locusts. It is in this manner that the world vilifies holy devotion as much as it can. It pictures devout persons are having discontented, gloomy, sullen faces and claims that devotion brings on depression and unbearable moods.” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 2)

In short, others may tell you that any attempt to live a holy life is just plain *crazy*!

In St. Francis de Sales’ opinion, being the kind of person that God wants you to be is not only *not* crazy but it is, in fact, the sanest decision you could ever make. He suggests:

“Devotion is true spiritual sugar for it removes discontent from the poor, anxiety from the rich, grief from the oppressed, pride from the exalted, melancholy from the solitary and exhausting from those in society. It serves with equal benefit as fire in winter and dew in summer. It knows how to enjoy prosperity and how to endure want. It makes honor and disgrace alike useful to us. It accepts pleasure and pain with a heart that is nearly always the same, and it fills us with a marvelous sweetness.” (*Ibid*)

Are we crazy to live a life of devotion? From Jesus’ perspective, we’d be crazy *not* to do so!

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(January 24, 2016: Third Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“This Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Words are like atoms. They can heal. They can energize. They can extend and improve the quality of life.

In the other hand, words can also wound. They can divide. They can poison. They can destroy.

St. Francis de Sales understood that our words - what we say, how we say it - have a very powerful impact on others. He offers the following advice: “**Let your language be mild, open, sincere, frank unaffected and honest.**” Integrity, justice and fairness should be hallmarks of our speech. Don’t dance around the issue. Speak directly from the heart. Don’t measure words to the point at which nothing is communicated. Still, being honest does not require us to be brutal or to “pile on” by saying all that is true at a particular moment. When in doubt, Francis tells us: “**It is never appropriate to say something against the truth.**”

“Never give others the occasion to believe that something evil is being spoken of them.” When speaking in public, be as inclusive as possible. When needing to speak in private, do so with sensitivity and discretion. Never use words in ways that actually injure another, or would cause others to think you are injuring them.

“Nothing is ever gained by harshness.” No matter how noble or righteous our values, we gain nothing by promoting them in words that are brutal or ham-handed.

“Wisdom consists of knowing how and when to speak, and when and where to keep silent.” In some cases, actions speak much more loudly - and more effectively - than words.

“Fidelity, plainness and sincerity of speech are assuredly a great ornament of a Christian life.” When we make it a habit to speak of the good that we need to pursue or of the evil we need to confront with kindness and compassion, is it any wonder that others experience healing, freedom, encouragement, life and love?

There is no doubt how God uses words. God's Word, as embodied in Jesus, “brings glad tidings to the poor, proclaims liberty to captives, offers sight to the blind, frees the oppressed and proclaims a time of favor from the Lord.”

In short, God's Word heals, liberates, encourages and raises others up. When we speak, what do our words do?

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(January 25, 2016: Conversion of Paul, Apostle)

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St. Francis de Sales had a special place in his heart for the person whose conversion we celebrate: Paul of Tarsus. Throughout his writings Francis not only refers to Paul by name but Francis also refers to Paul by two titles reserved solely for him: “The Apostle” and “The Great Apostle.”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales observed:

“The glorious St. Paul speaks thus. ‘The fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, long-suffering, mildness, faith, modesty, constancy and chastity.’ See how this divine Apostle enumerates these twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit but sets them down as only one fruit. He does not say, ‘The fruits of the Spirit are...,’ but rather ‘the fruit of the Spirit is...’ Charity is truly the sole fruit of the Holy Spirit, but this one fruit has an infinite number of excellent properties....He means that divine love gives us inward joy and consolation together with great peace of heart, which is preserved in adversity by patience. It makes us kind and gracious in helping our neighbor with a heartfelt goodness toward him. Such goodness is not whimsical; it is constant and persevering and gives us enduring courage by which we are rendered mild, pleasant and considerate to all others. We put up with their moods and imperfections. We keep perfect faith with them, as we thus testify to a simplicity accompanied with trust both in our words and in our actions. We live modestly and humbly, leaving aside all that is luxurious and in excess regarding food and drink, clothing, sleep, play, recreation and other such desires and pleasures. Above all, we discipline the inclinations and rebellions of the flesh by vigilant chastity. All this so to the end that our entire being may be given over to divine dilection both interiorly by joy, patience, long-suffering goodness and fidelity, but also exteriorly by kindness, mildness, modesty, constancy and chastity.” (Book 11, Chapter 19)

From what we see in the life of St. Paul, he obviously did more than merely speak of the fruit of the Spirit. He lived it. His life was transformed by it. He shared it as a gift with all those whose lives he touched. Like Francis de Sales, may we, too, not only admire the example of “the glorious St. Paul,” but also let us imitate his

example in our own lives. Let us do our level best to embody and share the gift of the Spirit which indeed has so many excellent properties.

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(January 26, 2016: Timothy and Titus, Bishops)

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In his preface to his Introduction to the Devout Life, the Bishop of Geneva observed:

“I foresee that many people will say that it is only members of religious communities and persons dedicated to devotion who should give special direction in piety, that such things require more leisure than a bishop in charge of a diocese as large as mine can have, and that such an undertaking is too distracting for a mind that should be employed in matters of importance. For my part, I tell you that it is primarily the duty of the bishop to lead souls to perfection, since their order is as supreme among men as that of the seraphim among angels. Hence their leisure cannot be better employed than in such work. The ancient bishops and fathers of the Church were at least as careful about their duties as we are, yet, as we see from their letters, they did not refuse to take charge of the particular conduct of souls who turned to them for assistance. In this they imitated the apostles who, while working with special and particular affection to gather all men, picked out certain extraordinary ears of grain. Who does not know that Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Onesimus, Tecla and Appia were the dear children of the great St. Paul...?”

Tempted as very busy people may be to perceive other folks as obstacles to getting things done, Francis de Sales (no doubt inspired as he was with the example of Paul’s willingness to mentor, support and encourage would-be protégés like Timothy and Titus in the work of proclaiming and living the Gospel) reminds us that the work with which each of us is charged *is* people – God’s people. There is no work, no ministry, and no job so important as to distract us from pursuing what really matters in this life: to lead, encourage and support one another in our quest for perfection. After all, as Francis de Sales reminds us in another section of his Introduction, “This life is only a journey to the happy life to come. We must march on as a band of brothers and sisters, companions united in meekness, peace and love.”

This task is our work. This task is our life - to journey together on the paths to perfection, i.e., to bring out the best in ourselves and in one another.

One person – one day – at a time.

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(January 27, 2016: Angela Merici, Religious)

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“Do you not understand this parable?”

Notwithstanding Jesus’ explanation of the parable to his disciples in today’s Gospel (which, according to most Scripture scholars, is actually a reflection on the part of the early Church placed on the lips of Jesus), it is easy to misunderstand the parable if we see it as a classification of different types of people in whom the seeds of God’s life and love do and/or do not grow. We are mistaken if we believe that the parable offers us some kind of spiritual template with which we can – as it were – pick classes of people out of a lineup.

To understand the parable we need to recognize that all of the scenarios that Jesus describes are at work within each and every one of us.

Consider this: on any given day, how deeply do we allow the seeds of God’s life and love to take root in us? On any given day, how many of those seeds get choked off by our worries, fears and anxieties? On any given day, how many of those seeds become overwhelmed by our selfish or self-serving pursuits? On any given day, how many of those seeds perish due to our inability and/or unwillingness to accept the adversity that sometimes comes with living a Gospel life? On any given, day how many of those seeds fail to germinate due to our shallowness?

In a sermon he preached on Palm Sunday, 1622 in Annecy, Francis de Sales observed:

“In all creatures, no matter who they are, some imperfections can be found. The person who denies he has any imperfections is just as much a liar as the person who claims that he has no imperfections at all. Every person, however holy, has some imperfections; every person, however wicked, has some good points. Made in God’s image and likeness, each person reflects something of God’s goodness; made from nothing, each person always carries with him some imperfection.” (Pulpit and Pew, p. 258)

There’s nothing to be ashamed of in this situation – after all, it is simply the truth. Some of the seeds of God’s life and love are doing rather well within each of us, whereas other seeds of God’s life and love need some real attention and lots of tender, loving care. Just because we have difficulty in making good use of all the seeds of God’s life and love within us on any given day doesn’t make us bad seeds!

Today, how can we become God’s “good soil” in our own lives and in the lives of others? What steps can we take to get a better yield from all the good seeds of divine life and love that God has planted so generously within and among us?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: January 14th - January 20th

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(January 14, 2016: Thursday, First Week in Ordinary Time)

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“The leprosy left him immediately...”

Time and time again throughout the four Gospels, we witness how Jesus cured people on the spot – their infirmity was healed, removed or eradicated immediately. In the case of today’s Gospel selection from Mark, Jesus immediately healed a person afflicted with leprosy.

But not all miracles happen in an instant. Some require several steps. Others require more time.

In Chapter 9 of the Gospel of John, Jesus cures a man born blind by first mixing spittle and mud before applying the mixture to the man’s eyes. In Chapter 8 of Mark’s Gospel, the healing of another blind man requires two stages. In Chapter 2 of John’s Gospel Jesus turns water into wine seemingly as a last resort. And in the Gospels of Mark (7:25-30) and Matthew (15:21-28) Jesus agreed to heal the possessed daughter of the Syrophenician woman only after what sometimes appears to have been a protracted negotiation. For that matter, in the Old Testament (2 Kings 5) Naaman the Syrian was cured of his leprosy only after bathing seven times in the River Jordan.

Whether in an instant, over several stages or during the course of a lifetime, all miracles share one thing in common – they begin by asking God for help. If even only as a first step, from what might we need to be healed, freed or liberated by God?

Today!

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(January 15, 2016: Friday, First Week in Ordinary Time)

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“For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.”

Romanian-born Jewish-American writer, professor, political activist, Nobel Laureate, and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once remarked: “When a person doesn’t have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity”.

Today’s Gospel offers us a powerful illustration of how the absence of gratitude - that is, somehow failing to recognize the goodness of the Lord - can diminish one’s humanity.

When Jesus heals a paralytic in two phases (first, by forgiving the man’s sins and second by curing the man’s infirmity) there isn’t an ounce of gratitude to be found anywhere among the scribes, because the only thing they seem capable of mustering is resentment. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the scribes seem to be suffering more from something missing in their humanity and they come off in this story as being sorry excuses for human beings.

Maybe the reason that the scribes failed to recognize a singular work of the Lord in the present (at the hands of Jesus) was due to the fact that they had managed to forget the collective works of the Lord in the past. Absorbed by their own sense of smug self-importance, the scribes appear to have lost their capacity for gratitude. These men of God no longer displayed any need for God.

Do you feel as if something is missing from your humanity? Forgetting how blessed you are? Then you should take time to remember the goodness of the Lord and, in whatever form you prefer, have the courage to sing about it!

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(January 16, 2016: Saturday, First Week in Ordinary Time)

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“For there were many who followed him...”

As word of Jesus’ reputation for helping those in need spread, we are told in today’s Gospel that lots of folks (including Levi, a customs official) from lots of places travelled lots of distances to see him, to behold his face, to hear his voice to experience his healing power and to know his love.

In one of his *Conferences* to the Sisters of the Visitation, Francis de Sales remarked:

“It is very good for us to know and feel our misery and imperfection, but we must not allow that to discourage us; rather, our awareness of our miseries should make us raise our hearts to God by a holy confidence, the

foundation of which ought to be in Him...The throne of God's mercy is our misery; therefore, the greater our misery the greater should be our confidence in God." (Living Jesus, page 45)

Today's Gospel challenges people in need not to avoid God but to pursue God. Awareness of our sinfulness should not drive us away from God but should draw us closer to God. Have confidence that God will help us. Have confidence that God will heal you. Have confidence that God will empower us.

Why? Because God loves us! How? In the person of his Son, Jesus.

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(January 17, 2016: Second Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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"Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs at Cana in Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him."

As a first step in "going public" goes, this first demonstration of Jesus' divine power is, to say the least, an understatement: no miraculous healing, no exorcism of demons and no raising someone from the dead. Instead, he simply prevents the caterer from running out of wine at a wedding reception.

Many might consider this a misuse - nay, even a waste - of Jesus' saving power. Initially, even Jesus himself seems to feel that his power could be used better - and later - elsewhere.

Not Francis de Sales. He sees that there is more to this miracle than meets the eye. Here is an example of how God's power permeates all human experiences, even the most ordinary. We are speaking here of the practice of the "little virtues", a notion precious indeed to St. Francis de Sales and a hallmark of his understanding of Christ's saving power. In his *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales wrote: "It may well be that a very small virtue has greater value in a soul in which sacred love reigns with fervor than martyrdom itself in a soul in which love is languid and feeble." (Book 11, Chapter 5) Put another way, the little virtues, the expression of care or concern in seemingly ordinary circumstances, may be "found more pleasing in God's sight than great and famous deeds performed with little charity or devotion."

Still, there is a place for great displays of love: "I do not say that we may not aspire to outstanding virtues, but I say that we must train ourselves in the little ones without which the great ones may be false or deceptive." (Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 159)

Jesus may have been tempted to believe that changing water into wine was beneath his divine - perhaps even his human - dignity. In the end, however, the needs of others were more persuasive than the desire to make a "big splash" in the eyes of others. Ironically, it may have been Jesus' willingness to employ his heavenly powers for such a down-to-earth request that enabled his disciples to "begin to believe in him."

His greater, more famous and once-in-a-lifetime displays of power would, indeed, come later. But whether on the cross of Calvary or at a simple wedding in Cana, the power, the promise and the person were one and the same.

The moral of this miracle? Nothing is too small for the Kingdom of God.

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(January 18, 2016: Monday, Second Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, and your disciples do not fast?”

What distinguishes your run-of-the-mill comedian from a truly great comedian? Well, aside from having good material, the almost-universal answer is: “Timing”. Successful comedians are gifted with – or learned to develop – an incredible sense of timing.

The point that Jesus is trying to make in today’s Gospel is no laughing matter. In many cases, timing *is* everything. Fasting and feasting (among other things) are both good things. The challenge is to develop the sense to know the proper time to do one or the other. Recall the words found in the Book of Ecclesiastes 3, verse 1: “There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven...”

In the Salesian tradition, developing this sense of timing goes hand-in-hand with the practice of virtue. In his Introduction to the Devout Life , Francis de Sales observed:

“A great fault in many who undertake the exercise of some particular virtue is thinking they must practice it in every situation. Like certain great philosophers, they wish either always to weep or always to laugh. Still worse, they condemn and censure others who do not practice the same virtues they do. The apostle (St. Paul) says, ‘Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep,’ and ‘charity is patient, is kind,’ generous, prudent, discreet and considerate.”

Jesus’ sense of timing - his knack for reading a situation, for recognizing his surroundings and for knowing what was called for with a particular person – enabled him to do the right thing at the right time in the right way. Unlike the “one-size-fits-all” approach of the disciples of John and the Pharisees, Jesus shows us that the authentic practice of virtue must be “tailor-made”.

Indeed, “there is a time for every purpose under heaven.” What time is it now? What are the things that God may be calling us to do today?

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(January 19, 2016: Tuesday, Second Week in Ordinary Time)

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“You are my father, my God, the Rock, my savior...”

In an undated letter addressed to “A Gentleman” who apparently had been struggling with a debilitating illness that had seriously challenged his confidence and faith in pretty much everything, Francis de Sales wrote:

“It is of great concern to me that everyone says that in addition to your physical illness, you are suffering from deep depression...Please tell me sir, what reason have you for remaining in this dark mood which is so harmful to you? I am afraid that your mind is still troubled by some fear of sudden death and the judgment of God. That is, alas, a unique kind of anguish! My own soul – which once endured it for six weeks – is in apposition to feel compassion for those who experience it.”

“So, sir, I must have a little heart to heart chat with you and tell you that anyone who has a true desire to serve our Lord and flee from sin should not torment himself with the thoughts of death or divine judgment: for while both the one and the other are to be feared, nevertheless, the fear must not be the terrible kind of natural fear which weakness and dampens the ardor and determination of the spirit, but rather a fear that is so full of

confidence in the goodness of God that in the end grows calm... This is not the time to start questioning whether or not we are strong enough to entrust ourselves to God.”

“So, now, since you want to belong entirely to God, why be afraid of your weakness – upon which, in any case, you shouldn’t be relying in the first place? You do hope in God, don’t you? And will anyone who hopes in God ever be put to shame? No, sir, never!”(LSD, page 180)

In good times, in bad times, and in all the times in between, God is our rock, our savior. At those times when – for whatever reason – we become more aware than usual of our weakness, we should remind ourselves of an even greater truth.

God’s strength.

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(January 20, 2016: Fabian, Pope/Martyr; Sebastian, Martyr)

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“Grieved at their hardness of heart...”

Recall last week’s account of Jesus and the paralyzed man? Jesus healed a paralytic in two phases (first, by forgiving the man’s sins and second, by curing the man’s infirmity). As astonishing as that two-fold miracle may have been to those who witnessed it, perhaps the only thing even more astonishing was the intractability of the scribes who questioned Jesus’ authority for doing so. Those men of God appeared to have lost any sense of their need for God.

We see the same dynamic played out in today’s Gospel. Jesus is painfully aware that the Pharisees are looking for any excuse to discredit him, even if it requires demonizing an objectively good and righteous act! In another case of putting the cart before the horse (or perhaps dropping the cart on the horse altogether!) the Pharisees – this time through their cold, calculating silence – are placing the primacy of the Sabbath far ahead of the opportunity to restore someone’s health, in effect, to bring them back to life.

We are told at the end of the day that the Pharisees were undaunted in their pursuit of pettiness and parochialism, hardening their hearts to God’s providence at every opportunity. Fortunately for us, Jesus was even more undaunted in his pursuit of righteousness. Grieved as he might have been, Jesus never allowed others’ hardness of heart to harden his heart.

As followers of Jesus, can the same be said of us?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: January 21st - January 27th

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(January 21, 2016: Agnes, Virgin/Martyr)

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“In God I trust; I shall not fear...”

Notwithstanding the increasingly common trend of removing all things religious from the arena of public life, did you know that St. Agnes is still on the books as the patron saint of the Girl Scouts? In his book [This Saint's for You](#), Thomas Craughwell writes:

“St. Agnes was chosen because not only was she martyred when she was barely in her teens, but she also possessed many of the qualities the Girl Scouts attempt to cultivate in themselves: courage, honesty, respect for self and for others, and service to God and neighbor.”

“Agnes came from a Christian family in Rome. She was about thirteen years old when she was arrested and hauled before a magistrate for the crime of being a Christian. He threatened to burn her alive, but Agnes would not deny her faith. Next, he tried to force her to join the virgins who served the goddess Vesta, but Agnes refused to perform any function in a pagan temple. Finally, the magistrate ordered the early adolescent to be exposed in a brothel and then beheaded. Despite the fact that Agnes was but one of tens of thousands of Christians martyred during the emperor Diocletian's persecution of the Church, devotion to her sprang up and spread almost instantly after her death. In imagery and art, Agnes is frequently portrayed with a lamb, a symbol of her innocence and purity as well as a take-off on her name: in Latin, the word for 'lamb' is agnus.” ([This Saint's for You](#), p. 192)

Perhaps Agnes should also be portrayed with a lion in addition to a lamb. She was innocent and pure as a lamb, but she also was a lion insofar as saw God as her father, her rock and her savior, the one helped her to be courageous and tenacious...to the death.

Today, how might we imitate her example of being both a lamb – and a lion – of God?

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(January 22, 2016: Friday, Second Week in Ordinary Time)

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On this anniversary of the US Supreme Court's decision, *Roe vs. Wade*, all dioceses in the United States are encouraged to observe a **“Day of Prayer”** for the Legal Protection of Unborn Children. It is suggested that the faithful throughout the country celebrate the Mass *“For Giving Thanks to God for the Gift of Human Life.”*

Over 400 years ago St. Francis de Sales made the following statement in his [Introduction to the Devout Life](#): **“Consider the nature God has given us. It is the highest in this visible world. It is capable of eternal life and of being perfectly united to God's Divine Majesty.”**([IDL](#), Part One, Chapter 9)

What is more precious – what is more profound – what is more promising – what is more powerful – than the God-given gift of life? What better way to express our gratitude for this greatest of gifts than to treat life in all its forms with profound respect and reverence from conception until natural death!

And at every single step in between!

(OR)

In his popularization of Bishop Camus's accounts of the life and legacy of St. Francis de Sales (in [The Spirit of Love](#)) CF. Kelley wrote:

“St. Francis de Sales would often say to me (Camus) how much better it would be to accommodate ourselves to others rather than to want to bend everyone to our own ways and opinions. The human mind is like pulp,

which takes readily any color with which it is mixed. The great thing is to take care that it not be like the chameleon, which, one after the other takes every color except white.”(Select Salesian Subjects, p. 122, 0523)

St. Francis de Sales’ preferred approach for evangelizing was to meet people where they lived. As his Catholic Controversies clearly demonstrate, however, the “Gentleman Saint” had no hesitation pointing out when people were doing something objectively wrong. While seeking to understand others’ ways and opinions as a strategy for winning people over, Francis never compromised his own principles or core beliefs.

The debate regarding Roe v. Wade and its impact in the United States shows no signs of waning. In addition, debate often denigrates into wholesale divisiveness, even *ad hominem* attacks. With this unfortunate state of affairs surrounding what is a life or death situation in mind, Jane de Chantal’s advice to a fellow Visitandine sister is especially relevant:

“I am convinced, and experience has taught me, that nothing so wins souls as gentleness and cordiality. Follow this method, for it is the spirit of our blessed Father. Curtness in words or actions only hardens hearts and depresses them, whereas gentleness encourages them and makes them receptive...” (LSD, page 247)

Discussions about how best to legally protect unborn children appear to produce little or no consensus. Arguments for and against “legislating morality” seem to have no end. In the meantime, there is nothing to be lost – and perhaps much to be gained – by continuing to pray that “liberty and justice for all” will, in fact, be just that - for all, including unborn children.

Today, may God help us to put that prayer into action with as much poignant purpose – and gentle persuasion – as we can.

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(January 23, 2016: Marianne Cope, Religious)

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“When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’”

In a perfect world, being true to yourself – being the person that God wants you to be – should be its own reward. But as even Jesus discovers in today’s Gospel, being true to yourself – being the person that God wants you to be – can bring with it some unwarranted and unwelcomed resistance and rejection.

Especially from family, friends and other loved ones!

Only three pages into his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales deals with this phenomenon head-on.

“The men who discouraged the Israelites from going into the Promised Land told them that it was a country that ‘devoured its inhabitants.’ In other words, they said that the air was so malignant it was impossible to live there for long and its natives such monsters that they ate men like locusts. It is in this manner that the world vilifies holy devotion as much as it can. It pictures devout persons are having discontented, gloomy, sullen faces and claims that devotion brings on depression and unbearable moods.” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 2)

In short, others may tell you that any attempt to live a holy life is just plain *crazy*!

In St. Francis de Sales’ opinion, being the kind of person that God wants you to be is not only *not crazy* but it is, in fact, the sanest decision you could ever make. He suggests:

“Devotion is true spiritual sugar for it removes discontent from the poor, anxiety from the rich, grief from the oppressed, pride from the exalted, melancholy from the solitary and exhausting from those in society. It serves with equal benefit as fire in winter and dew in summer. It knows how to enjoy prosperity and how to endure want. It makes honor and disgrace alike useful to us. It accepts pleasure and pain with a heart that is nearly always the same, and it fills us with a marvelous sweetness.” (*Ibid*)

Are we crazy to live a life of devotion? From Jesus’ perspective, we’d be crazy *not* to do so!

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(January 24, 2016: Third Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“This Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Words are like atoms. They can heal. They can energize. They can extend and improve the quality of life.

In the other hand, words can also wound. They can divide. They can poison. They can destroy.

St. Francis de Sales understood that our words - what we say, how we say it - have a very powerful impact on others. He offers the following advice: “**Let your language be mild, open, sincere, frank unaffected and honest.**” Integrity, justice and fairness should be hallmarks of our speech. Don’t dance around the issue. Speak directly from the heart. Don’t measure words to the point at which nothing is communicated. Still, being honest does not require us to be brutal or to “pile on” by saying all that is true at a particular moment. When in doubt, Francis tells us: “**It is never appropriate to say something against the truth.**”

“**Never give others the occasion to believe that something evil is being spoken of them.**” When speaking in public, be as inclusive as possible. When needing to speak in private, do so with sensitivity and discretion. Never use words in ways that actually injure another, or would cause others to think you are injuring them.

“**Nothing is ever gained by harshness.**” No matter how noble or righteous our values, we gain nothing by promoting them in words that are brutal or ham-handed.

“**Wisdom consists of knowing how and when to speak, and when and where to keep silent.**” In some cases, actions speak much more loudly - and more effectively - than words.

“**Fidelity, plainness and sincerity of speech are assuredly a great ornament of a Christian life.**” When we make it a habit to speak of the good that we need to pursue or of the evil we need to confront with kindness and compassion, is it any wonder that others experience healing, freedom, encouragement, life and love?

There is no doubt how God uses words. God's Word, as embodied in Jesus, “brings glad tidings to the poor, proclaims liberty to captives, offers sight to the blind, frees the oppressed and proclaims a time of favor from the Lord.”

In short, God's Word heals, liberates, encourages and raises others up. When we speak, what do our words do?

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(January 25, 2016: Conversion of Paul, Apostle)

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St. Francis de Sales had a special place in his heart for the person whose conversion we celebrate: Paul of Tarsus. Throughout his writings Francis not only refers to Paul by name but Francis also refers to Paul by two titles reserved solely for him: “The Apostle” and “The Great Apostle.”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales observed:

“The glorious St. Paul speaks thus. ‘The fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, long-suffering, mildness, faith, modesty, constancy and chastity.’ See how this divine Apostle enumerates these twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit but sets them down as only one fruit. He does not say, ‘The fruits of the Spirit are...,’ but rather ‘the fruit of the Spirit is...’ Charity is truly the sole fruit of the Holy Spirit, but this one fruit has an infinite number of excellent properties....He means that divine love gives us inward joy and consolation together with great peace of heart, which is preserved in adversity by patience. It makes us kind and gracious in helping our neighbor with a heartfelt goodness toward him. Such goodness is not whimsical; it is constant and persevering and gives us enduring courage by which we are rendered mild, pleasant and considerate to all others. We put up with their moods and imperfections. We keep perfect faith with them, as we thus testify to a simplicity accompanied with trust both in our words and in our actions. We live modestly and humbly, leaving aside all that is luxurious and in excess regarding food and drink, clothing, sleep, play, recreation and other such desires and pleasures. Above all, we discipline the inclinations and rebellions of the flesh by vigilant chastity. All this so to the end that our entire being may be given over to divine dilection both interiorly by joy, patience, long-suffering goodness and fidelity, but also exteriorly by kindness, mildness, modesty, constancy and chastity.” (Book 11, Chapter 19)

From what we see in the life of St. Paul, he obviously did more than merely speak of the fruit of the Spirit. He lived it. His life was transformed by it. He shared it as a gift with all those whose lives he touched. Like Francis de Sales, may we, too, not only admire the example of “the glorious St. Paul,” but also let us imitate his example in our own lives. Let us do our level best to embody and share the gift of the Spirit which indeed has so many excellent properties.

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(January 26, 2016: Timothy and Titus, Bishops)

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In his preface to his Introduction to the Devout Life, the Bishop of Geneva observed:

“I foresee that many people will say that it is only members of religious communities and persons dedicated to devotion who should give special direction in piety, that such things require more leisure than a bishop in charge of a diocese as large as mine can have, and that such an undertaking is too distracting for a mind that should be employed in matters of importance. For my part, I tell you that it is primarily the duty of the bishop to lead souls to perfection, since their order is as supreme among men as that of the seraphim among angels. Hence their leisure cannot be better employed than in such work. The ancient bishops and fathers of the Church were at least as careful about their duties as we are, yet, as we see from their letters, they did not refuse to take charge of the particular conduct of souls who turned to them for assistance. In this they imitated the apostles who, while working with special and particular affection to gather all men, picked out certain extraordinary ears of grain. Who does not know that Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Onesimus, Tecla and Appia were the dear children of the great St. Paul...?”

Tempted as very busy people may be to perceive other folks as obstacles to getting things done, Francis de Sales (no doubt inspired as he was with the example of Paul’s willingness to mentor, support and encourage would-be protégés like Timothy and Titus in the work of proclaiming and living the Gospel) reminds us that the work with which each of us is charged *is* people – God’s people. There is no work, no ministry, and no job so important as to distract us from pursuing what really matters in this life: to lead, encourage and support one

another in our quest for perfection. After all, as Francis de Sales reminds us in another section of his [Introduction](#), “This life is only a journey to the happy life to come. We must march on as a band of brothers and sisters, companions united in meekness, peace and love.”

This task is our work. This task is our life - to journey together on the paths to perfection, i.e., to bring out the best in ourselves and in one another.

One person – one day – at a time.

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(January 27, 2016: Angela Merici, Religious)

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“Do you not understand this parable?”

Notwithstanding Jesus’ explanation of the parable to his disciples in today’s Gospel (which, according to most Scripture scholars, is actually a reflection on the part of the early Church placed on the lips of Jesus), it is easy to misunderstand the parable if we see it as a classification of different types of people in whom the seeds of God’s life and love do and/or do not grow. We are mistaken if we believe that the parable offers us some kind of spiritual template with which we can – as it were – pick classes of people out of a lineup.

To understand the parable we need to recognize that all of the scenarios that Jesus describes are at work within each and every one of us.

Consider this: on any given day, how deeply do we allow the seeds of God’s life and love to take root in us? On any given day, how many of those seeds get choked off by our worries, fears and anxieties? On any given day, how many of those seeds become overwhelmed by our selfish or self-serving pursuits? On any given day, how many of those seeds perish due to our inability and/or unwillingness to accept the adversity that sometimes comes with living a Gospel life? On any given, day how many of those seeds fail to germinate due to our shallowness?

In a sermon he preached on Palm Sunday, 1622 in Annecy, Francis de Sales observed:

[“In all creatures, no matter who they are, some imperfections can be found. The person who denies he has any imperfections is just as much a liar as the person who claims that he has no perfections at all. Every person, however holy, has some imperfections; every person, however wicked, has some good points. Made in God’s image and likeness, each person reflects something of God’s goodness; made from nothing, each person always carries with him some imperfection.”](#) ([Pulpit and Pew](#), p. 258)

There’s nothing to be ashamed of in this situation – after all, it is simply the truth. Some of the seeds of God’s life and love are doing rather well within each of us, whereas other seeds of God’s life and love need some real attention and lots of tender, loving care. Just because we have difficulty in making good use of all the seeds of God’s life and love within us on any given day doesn’t make us bad seeds!

Today, how can we become God’s “good soil” in our own lives and in the lives of others? What steps can we take to get a better yield from all the good seeds of divine life and love that God has planted so generously within and among us?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: January 28th - February 3rd

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(January 28, 2016: Thomas Aquinas, Priest/Religious/Doctor of the Church)

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“The measure with which you measure will be measured out to you.”

In his book The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholics, Matthew Kelly writes:

“All the great figures that emerge in the Gospels are generous. Sure, you have the widow’s mite, an obvious act of generosity. But in every great Gospel figure you find generosity. Mary’s response to God when the angel appeared to her was an incredible act of faith, surrender and generosity. The Magi, traveling from afar with gifts for the infant Jesus, were generous. The centurion begging Jesus to cure his servant was generous. The first twelve’s leaving everything to follow Jesus was incredibly generous. And then there is Jesus himself. His first miracle at Cana was not a miracle of need; it was a miracle of abundance and generosity. Throughout his life he served people by teaching them, feeding them, healing them, providing spiritual leadership and comforting them. Finally, in his suffering and death on the cross, he laid down his life for us in the ultimate act of generosity. The Gospels are a story about the triumph of generosity.”

“Generosity is at the heart of the Christian life, just as it is at the heart of the Gospel. For it is often through our generosity that we are able to bring the love of God to life in others in very real and tangible ways. God is by his very nature generous. God wants to convince us of his generosity, and in turn wants us to live generous lives.” (pp. 110 – 111)

It isn’t high theology, but what Jesus is basically saying is, “What goes around comes around.” If we are generous to others, it will come back to us not later in heaven, but already here and now on earth, and not merely tit-for-tat. Jesus told us in yesterday’s Gospel that our generosity will come back to us thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. Likewise, if we are stingy toward others, that, too, will come back to us thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. Whether we realize it or not, how we choose to live our lives each and every day builds up over a lifetime a kind of spiritual compound interest.

Today, how generously will you measure unto others?

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(January 29, 2016: Friday, Third Week in Ordinary Time)

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“The land yields fruit: first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote: [“Wherever we may be, we can and should aspire to a perfect life.”](#)

Throughout his ministry, Francis de Sales repeatedly counseled people to make a stark – but sometimes all-too-subtle – distinction between perfection and perfectionism. It seems that the fault of many folks in Francis de Sales’ day was not that they weren’t trying to “aspire to a perfect life.” They were, in fact, trying too hard. They were overwhelmed with good intentions but underwhelmed by their results. Typical of this counsel is a letter from Francis de Sales to Madame Angelique Arnauld, in which he wrote: [“I do know you well and I know that your heart is steadfastly determined to live entirely for God; but I also know that your great natural activity harasses you with many restless impulses. O dear daughter, you must not imagine that the work we](#)

have undertaken to do in you can be done so quickly. Cherry trees bear their fruit quickly because they only bear cherries which keep but a short time; but the palm, the prince of trees, only begins bearing fruit a hundred years after it has been planted, it is said. A mediocre life can be achieved in a year, but the perfection for which we are striving – that, my dear daughter, takes quite a few years to establish itself...” (Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 274)

If a grain of wheat takes time to grow – if an ear of corn takes time to grow – so much the more time is required for us human beings to grow as we “aspire to a perfect life.”

Anything worth doing takes time. In our case, it requires a lifetime!

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(January 30, 2016: Saturday, Third Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Why are you terrified?”

It’s a great question that Jesus proposes to his disciples in today’s Gospel. For our part, we could probably list any number of things in our own lives that have scared, frightened or even terrified us in the past, that could scare, frighten or terrify us in the future or perhaps are scaring, frightening or terrifying us at this very moment. The fact of the matter is that every life comes with its share of things, situations and events that actually should terrify us!

In a letter to Angelique Arnauld, the Abbess of Port Royal, Francis de sales wrote:

“‘Oh, unhappy man that I am,’ said the great apostle, ‘who will deliver me from the body of this death?’ St. Paul felt as if an army, made up of his moods, aversions, habits and natural inclinations had conspired to bring about his spiritual death. Because they terrified him, he showed that he despised them. Because he despised them, he could not endure them without pain. His pain made him cry out this way and then answer his own cry by asserting that the grace of God through Jesus Christ will indeed defend him, but not from fear, or terror, or alarm nor from the fight; rather, from defeat and from being overcome.” (Letters of Spiritual Direction, pp. 172-173)

There are things in life that scare, frighten and terrify us for good reason. Jesus is not asking us to never experience these (or other) emotions when they come upon us with good reason; rather Jesus is asking us to remember (as was the case with the disciples in today’s Gospel) that in the midst of whatever storms and surges that we may experience in life, we are never alone!

Jesus is always – and forever – with us.

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(January 31, 2016: Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“Love rejoices in the truth...”

Jeremiah wanted no part of being a prophet. This avocation seemed to be nothing but trouble, and with good reason, because the prophets of the past had a nasty habit of getting hassled, being rejected, getting beat up, sometimes, ending up dead. Nevertheless, God was adamant that Jeremiah live a prophetic life – that is, being

willing to speak the truth, being able to tell it “like it is” – and that He would sustain Jeremiah in the face of whatever opposition or dangers he might encounter.

No surprise that Jesus, too, experienced his share of opposition, hostility and rejection. As today’s Gospel illustrates, speaking the truth – living the truth – sometimes stirs up its own share of hornets’ nests.

By virtue of our Baptism and Confirmation we, too, are called to live our lives in a prophetic manner. In the words of St. Paul, we “do not rejoice in what is false; we rejoice in the truth.” As we all know, however, this is easier said than done. There are many occasions on any given day when we hesitate to tell the truth for any number of reasons: we don’t want to cause trouble, we don’t want to upset others, we don’t want others to be angry with us, we don’t want to be rejected and we want to be liked. And so, we measure our words and we speak in convoluted ways. We don’t say what we mean and we don’t mean what we say.

In other words, we lie.

Francis de Sales wrote: “Your language should be restrained, frank, sincere, candid, unaffected and honest. Be on guard against equivocation, ambiguity, or dissimulation.” This statement does not give us the license to use blunt force when telling the truth. Remember that Francis de Sales also tells us that we are more likely to win over other people with a teaspoon of honey rather than a gallon of vinegar. Wherever possible, we should speak the truth in a gentle, mild, simple and straightforward manner, avoiding the two extremes of being either mush-mouthed or vesuvial. In addition, telling it “like it is” is not the same as “letting it all hang out.” Francis continued: “While it is not always advisable to say all that is true, it is never permissible to speak against the truth.”

Regardless of how much or little of the truth that we speak in a manner that is as calm, humble, gentle and respectful as humanly possible. The bottom line is that we cannot always predict – and certainly cannot control – how that truth will be heard or received by others. Perhaps, it is no coincidence, then, that love not only “rejoices in the truth” but it also requires patience, it also requires forbearance; it is not prone to anger, it does not brood over injuries; it ultimately requires “trust, hope and the power to endure.”

Jesus promised us that the truth will set us free. Jesus never promised us that it would be easy.

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(February 1, 2016: Monday, Fourth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“The man who had been possessed pleaded to remain with Him, but Jesus would not permit him...”

The story in today’s Gospel is but one of many occasions in which people – after having encountering Jesus – expressed their desire to follow Him, only to have their request denied. Whether in the case of the man possessed by many demons or in the cases of so many other people whose lives were forever changed by an encounter with Jesus, his directive to “go home” must have been a real let-down.

Especially in the case of John the Baptist!

In a letter to St. Jane de Chantal (14 October, 1604), Francis de Sales wrote:

“I have often wondered who is the most mortified of the saints I know, and after some reflection I have come to the conclusion that it was John the Baptist. He knew that our Savior came to earth in a place quite close by, perhaps only one or two days’ journey away. How his heart, touched with love of his Savior from the time he was in his mother’s womb must have longed to enjoy his presence. Yet he spends twenty-five years in the

desert without coming to see Our Lord even once; and leaving the desert he stays to catechize without visiting him but waiting until Our Lord comes to seek him out. Then when he has baptized him he does not follow him but remains behind to do his appointed task...The example of this great saint overwhelms me with its grandeur.” (Conference XIV, p. 259)

It is easy to forget that after their encounter in the River Jordan during which John baptized Jesus, John remained behind while Jesus moved on. Yet, who would deny that John was, nevertheless, a follower – a disciple – of the Lord? As it turns out, there is more than one way to follow Jesus. While some announce what the Lord has done for them in unfamiliar or faraway places, others announce what the Lord has done for them right in their own homes and neighborhoods.

Just this day, whether it is in a place half-a-world away or right in your own back yard, how can you “follow” Jesus by giving witness to others for all that the Lord has done for you?

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(February 2, 2016: Presentation of the Lord)

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“Since the children are people of blood and flesh, Jesus likewise has a full share in these...”

“God has signified to us in so many ways and by so many means that He wills all of us to be saved that no one can be ignorant of this fact. For this purpose, God made us ‘in his own image and likeness’ by creation, and by the Incarnation God has made himself in our image and likeness, after which he suffered death in order to ransom and save all mankind.” (Treatise on the Love of God, Book 8, Chapter 4)

We are probably somewhat familiar with the notion that through creation we are made in God’s image and likeness. In contrast, we are probably far less familiar with the notion that God, through the Incarnation made Himself in our image and likeness. Familiar or not, both are true.

St. Francis de Sales was captivated by the notion that God loved us so much that He not only came among us, but he also became one of us! God took on our very nature! In the person of Jesus, God gained and experienced first-hand knowledge of what it means to sleep, to wake, to work, to rest, to dance, to cry, to mourn, to struggle, to succeed and to dream. In this Jesus not only redeems what it means to be human, but Jesus also celebrates what it means to be human - to be human as God dreams.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews likewise believed this truth. He writes that “Jesus had a full share” in blood and flesh...and “had to become like his brothers (and sisters) in every way.” In this way, Jesus could not only redeem us but also he could truly understand us.

This truth is indeed a great mystery and a supreme expression of intimacy. God so loved us that he took on our nature...He made himself into our image and likeness – the truest and best nature as God intended from the beginning of time. In a manner of speaking, through the Incarnation God shows us how to be comfortable in our own skin. How? By showing us that God is comfortable in our skin in the person of his son, Jesus Christ!

Put simply, it is in God’s nature to meet us where – and how – we are.

Today, how can we imitate God’s example through our willingness to meet others where and how they are?

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(February 3, 2016: Blaise, Bishop and Martyr)

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“He was not able to perform any mighty deed there...”

For all his divine power, even Jesus’ humanity had its limits. While ministering among people who knew him – family, friends and neighbors – Jesus found himself unable to perform any miracles or wonders, apart from a handful of cures. The source of his frustration was other peoples’ lack of faith.

We’ve touched on this topic before. Jesus ends many a miracle – many a sign – many a wonder – by telling the person he was cured, healed or forgiven: “Your faith has been your salvation.” This episode suggests that the first step of any miracle is for the would-be recipient to have faith: faith that for God all things are possible; faith that in the person of Jesus one can see – and experience – God. Without that first step, the following steps are hard – if not impossible – to complete.

Regardless of how deeply Jesus longed to help and heal those in need, he also knew this terrible truth – you cannot force love on others.

We know from our own experience that it is often the people we know best – and the people who know us best – who are the occasion of much heartache and heartbreak in our lives. Like Jesus, let us continue to offer ourselves as sources of help and healing in their lives. Let us also remember that we cannot force anyone to accept our offers of help or healing.

Love isn’t love if we force it on others.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: February 4th - February 10th

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(February 4, 2016: Thursday, Fourth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“He summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Do you seriously wish to travel the road to devotion? ‘A faithful friend is the medicine of life and immortality, and those who fear the Lord find him.’ As you see, these divine words refer chiefly to immortality, and for this we above all else have this faithful friend who by advice and counsel guides our actions and thus protects us from the snares and deceits of the wicked one. For us such a friend will be a treasure of wisdom in affliction, sorrow and failure. He will serve as a medicine to ease and comfort our hearts. He will guard us from evil and make our good still better. You must have a guide (or companion) on this holy road to devotion.” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 4, p. 46)

When Jesus sent his followers out to preach the Good News, he did not send them out alone. Jesus used the “buddy system,” sending them out together, in pairs. In the mind of God being a disciple of Jesus has nothing to do with being a lone wolf.

Today, what is the lesson for us? The road of life is sometimes lonely enough without trying to travel it alone. Just as in the case of the first disciples we, too, – disciples of Jesus – need to stick together.

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(February 5, 2016: Agatha, Virgin and Martyr)

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"Ask of me whatever you wish and I will grant it to you."

There's an old Irish expression that goes something like this: "Be careful what you pray for." Today's Gospel offers a variant of this wisdom: "Be prudent about what you promise."

Herod is so captivated – one might say even star-struck – by the dance performed by his daughter that he impulsively promises her whatever she desires, even "up to half of his kingdom." Of course, the daughter dutifully asks her mother what she should request. Herodias seizes the opportunity to settle the score with John the Baptizer and instructs her daughter to ask Herod for the head of the prophet.

And we know how this story ends for Herod...and for John.

Perhaps a pithy – but a no-less-powerful – point to ponder today is this. Think twice before you say something. Words once spoken cannot be retrieved. Don't lose your head – or someone's else's for that matter – over an impulsive proposition or promise.

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(February 6, 2016: Paul Miki and Companions, Martyrs)

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"His heart was moved...for they were like sheep without a shepherd..."

In today's Gospel we hear that Jesus' heart was moved by the sight of the crowd who "were like sheep without a shepherd." In other words, the people were lost.

"Lost" is defined as:

- not made use of, won, or claimed
- no longer possessed or no longer known
- ruined or destroyed physically or morally
- taken away or beyond reach or attainment
- unable to find the way
- no longer visible
- lacking assurance or self-confidence
- helpless
- not appreciated or understood
- obscured or overlooked during a process or activity
- hopelessly unattainable

It's safe to say that we all have the experience of being "lost" from time-to-time. Sometimes, we might experience being "lost" in any number of ways for long periods of time. Fortunately for us, one of the reasons that Jesus became one of us was to find the lost.

Consider yourself found!

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(February 7, 2016: Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“Leave me Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

We have every reason to believe that Peter was a very good fisherman. He would know how, when and where to catch fish. He would know all the good spots. He would know when to stick with a place; he would know when to move on to another. Perhaps most importantly, Peter would know that even the most successful fisherman sometime comes home empty-handed.

Enter Jesus - a new face and a new name. While apparently a great teacher and healer, he was the last person from whom Peter would expect to receive fishing advice. Can anyone fault Peter for his initial skepticism?

Still, he relented. For whatever reason - an intuition about Jesus' power, a desire to show Jesus up - to the deep water of the lake Peter and his colleagues returned. And as we know, his reluctant second effort was rewarded far beyond his expectations.

This sudden and mysterious turn of events prompts Peter to consider his own sinfulness. In particular, perhaps his belief - understandably so - that he knew far more about fishing than Jesus. Perhaps his hope of embarrassing Jesus; perhaps his own pride or bullheadedness; perhaps his resentment that Jesus had, in fact, been right.

Seems that Peter wasn't so perfect after all.

And yet, it is precisely this imperfect person (along with other imperfect people) whom Jesus called to learn and share his love. Why?

St. Francis de Sales hits the nail on the head: [“Although he was subject to so many imperfections, St. Peter was chosen because, notwithstanding his defects, he was always filled with courage to take a second look at a situation.”](#) Peter had the courage to listen - however reluctantly - to Jesus' advice. Peter had the courage - after all, he would have appeared foolish to his colleagues to take direction from a carpenter's son - to consider Jesus' suggestion. More personally, Peter had the courage to confront his own arrogance. Ultimately, Peter had the courage to consider that sometimes God's wisdom flies in the face of human expectation and experience.

We, like Peter, are imperfect people. We have our share of defects and shortcomings. Yet, Jesus calls us, too, as we are, to be his disciples. Take heart; have the courage to name your gifts; have the courage to name your sinfulness; have the courage to learn from others; most importantly, have the courage to follow God's invitation no matter where, when or how it leads you.

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(February 8, 2016: Monday, Fifth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“They begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak; and as many as touched it were healed.”

People continued to bring the sick – and themselves – to be healed by Jesus. The account in today's selection from the Gospel of Mark provides an interesting detail: folks coming to Jesus for help believed that if they merely touched his clothing they would experience healing power.

It would seem that just a little bit of Jesus – even the smallest touch of Jesus – went a very long way.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote: “Among sacred lovers there are some who so completely devote themselves to exercises of divine love that its holy fire devours and consumes their life...” (Book VII, Chapter 10, p. 41) Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of this love. His love for others was so intense that even the smallest sampling of it changed forever the lives of those he touched.

Today, will the same be said of our love?

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(February 9, 2016: Tuesday, Fifth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord, mighty God!”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales observed: “Remember that God is not only in the place where you are: God is present in a most particular manner in your heart and in the very center of your spirit.” (Part II, Chapter 2, p. 85)

Clearly, this truth was completely lost on many of the Pharisees and scribes. If they had realized that God dwells less in temples, laws, precepts and traditions and more within and among human beings, then they would had put their priorities in order. However, they were more concerned about protecting their own ways of doing things at the expense of promoting the ways of God, The result? The Pharisees and scribes became stumbling blocks for themselves and others when it came to recognizing that God’s preferred and most personal dwelling place is with and among God’s people.

Each of us is a dwelling place of the Lord. God dwells in us and we dwell in God.

Will the ways that we relate to others just this day give witness to this truth?

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(February 10, 2016: Ash Wednesday)

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“Be quick to hear; slow to speak, slow to anger for anger does not accomplish the righteousness of God...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales observed:

“‘It is better,’ says St. Augustine, ‘to deny entrance to just and reasonable anger than to admit it, no matter how small it may be. Once admitted, it is driven out again only with difficulty. It enters as a little twig and in less than no time it grows big and becomes a beam.’ If anger can only gain the night on us and if the sun sets on it (which the Apostle forbids) it turns into hatred, from which we have hardly any way of ridding ourselves. It is nourished by a thousand false pretexts; there never was an angry man who thought his anger unjust.”

“It is better to attempt to find a way to live without anger than to pretend to make a moderate, discreet use of it. When we find ourselves surprised into anger through our own imperfections and frailty, it is better to drive it away quickly than to start a discussion with it. If we give anger even the smallest of opportunities it will become the mistress of the house, like a serpent that easily draws in his whole body where it can first get in its head.” (Part II, Chapter 8)

We know from our own experience that anger can get out of hand in the blink of an eye. How many conversations, interactions and negotiations have come undone because someone allowed anger to get the upper hand? Even in cases where our anger may be justified, in the long run anger often does far more damage than good.

Francis de Sales' advice?

“When your mind is tranquil and without any cause for anger, build up a stock of meekness and mildness. Speak all your words and do all your actions – whether little or great – in the mildest way you can...Moreover, in the unfortunate case that you realize that you are guilty of a wrathful deed, correct the fault right away by an act of meekness toward the person with whom you are angry. We must repair our anger instantly by a contrary act of meekness. Fresh wounds are quickest healed, as the saying goes.” (*Ibid*)

Today, do you want to accomplish the righteousness of God? Then, do your level best to listen. Think twice before you speak. Above all, avoid so-called “righteous” anger in your interactions with others, since - most days – “righteous” anger isn’t “righteous” at all.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: February 11th - February 17th

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(February 11, 2016: Our Lady of Lourdes)

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“If you are led astray and serve other gods...you will certainly perish...”

Other gods – idols – are defined as “an object of extreme devotion”. In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales cautions us from going to extremes when it comes to fasting or any other form of devotion. Beginning with a quote from St. Jerome, he wrote:

“Long, immoderate fasts displease me very much...I have learned by experience that when an ass’ foal grows tired, it tends to wander away,’ meaning that those who are weakened by excessive fasting easily turn to soft living. Stags run poorly in two situations – when they are too fat and when they are too lean. We are very exposed to temptation both when our bodies are too pampered and when they are too run down, for the one makes the body demanding in its softened state and the other desperate in affliction. Just as we cannot support the body when it is too fat, so, too, it cannot support us when it is too thin. Lack of moderation in fasting and other forms of austerity makes many people’s best years useless for the service of charity. After all, the more some people mistreat the body in the beginning, the more they tend to pamper it in the end. Wouldn’t people do better to have a program that is balanced and in keeping with the duties and tasks their state in life obliges them to do?” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 23, p. 185)

A word of advice: When it comes to fasting of the body, the mind, the soul or spirit, avoid the temptation of going to extremes.

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(February 12, 2016: Friday after Ash Wednesday)

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“This is the fasting that I wish...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Both fasting and labor mortify and subdue the flesh. If your work is necessary for you to contribute to God’s glory, I much prefer that you endure the pains of work rather than of fasting. Such is the mind of the Church, for it exempts those who are working in the service of God and our neighbor even from prescribed fasts. One mind finds it difficult to fast, another to take care of the sick, visit prisoners, hear confessions, preach, comfort the afflicted, pray and perform similar tasks. These last sufferings are of far greater value than the first. In addition to disciplining the body, they produce much more desirable fruits...” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 23, p. 186)

And what are these “more desirable fruits”? Isaiah names a few: “releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke, setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke, sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless, clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own.”

Today, what is the kind of fasting that God may wish from us? The answer: the sacrifice, discipline and self-mastery that come more from focusing on what we can try to do, rather than on what we can try to do without.

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(February 13, 2016: Saturday after Ash Wednesday)

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“If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech...light shall rise for you in the darkness...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Your language should be restrained, frank, sincere, candid, unaffected and honest. Be on guard against equivocation, ambiguity or dissimulation. While it is not always advisable to say everything that is true, it is never permissible to speak against the truth. You must become accustomed never to tell a deliberate lie whether to excuse yourself or for some other purposes, remembering always that God is the ‘God of truth.’ As the sacred word tells us, the Holy Spirit does not dwell in a deceitful or slippery soul. No artifice comes close to being so good and desirable as plain dealing ...” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 30, p. 206)

Whether in fasting from telling lies – or being committed to telling the truth – what steps can we take today to make the light rise a bit higher and brighter in the darkness for ourselves and others by the type of speech we choose to speak?

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(February 14, 2016: First Sunday of Lent)

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While Jesus was preparing to begin his public ministry - to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God, to be the kind of Messiah envisioned by His Father and to open up his mind and heart to the power and promise of the Holy Spirit - he was tempted.

Jesus was tempted to turn stone into bread. Jesus was tempted with all the power and glory of earthly kingdoms. Jesus was tempted to throw himself from the temple: presumably, to convince people of his identity and authority.

What is the fundamental temptation here? Jesus was tempted to be someone other than who God wanted him to be. Jesus was tempted to be a different kind of savior. Jesus was tempted to believe that there was an easier way to redeem, to save, to sanctify. Jesus was tempted to believe that there was a short cut to salvation.

We can relate to this temptation. How often do we tell ourselves that we would be happier, healthier and holier if we were someone else? How often do we say that there must be another way (read, an easier way, a shortcut) to be a good wife, a good husband, a good son or daughter, a good sister or brother, a good friend or neighbor? The tragedy is that if we spend our lives believing that we'd be better off if we were someone or somewhere else, we never live the one life - the only life - that God gives us.

Francis de Sales writes: "[Don't sow your desires in someone else's garden; just cultivate your own as best you can. Don't long to be someone other than what you are; rather, desire to thoroughly be who you are. Direct your thoughts to being very good at that and to bear the crosses, little or great, that you find there. Believe me, this is the most important point - and the least understood - in the spiritual life.](#)" ([Letters of Spiritual Direction](#), p. 112)

Jesus was tempted to be someone and be somehow other than who he was. Jesus was tempted to forsake the authentic pathway of love for the hollow, devilish promise of a shortcut. Jesus was tempted to take the (seemingly) easy way out. However, his belief in God's plan for him allowed Jesus to disavow the empty promise of a quick fix for the path that leads to true happiness, health and holiness.

As we journey through yet another season of Lent, let us ask for the courage we need to recognize the voice of the tempter in us. Ask for the insight to see the ways in which you are tempted to spend your life wishing you were someone else. Ask for the grace and the strength to follow the example of Christ.

Be who you are, and be that well.

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(February 15, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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"You shall not...You shall."

Today's readings remind us that being children of God comes with its share of "do's" and "don'ts".

The "don'ts" include: You shall not steal. You shall not lie or speak falsely. You shall not defraud or rob. You shall not withhold. You shall not curse. You shall not spread slander. You shall not hate.

The "do's" include: You shall feed the hungry. You shall satisfy the thirsty. You shall clothe the naked. You shall welcome the stranger. You shall care for the sick. You shall visit the imprisoned.

Many people experience the commandment to follow both the letter and the spirit of God's Law to be burdensome. In today's Gospel, Jesus insists that living by God's Law is not only not burdensome, but in fact is the way to Beatitude – it is the way of being "blessed" by being blessing in the lives of others.

Be it through “do’s” or “don’ts”, how might God be asking you to be a source of divine Beatitude – that is, a blessing – in the lives of others today?

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(February 16, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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“Do not babble like the pagans...”

In today’s Gospel Jesus gives instruction on the proper way to pray. He cautions us to “not babble like the pagans” who think that they will be heard because of their many words.

In a sermon given on April 5, 1615, Francis de Sales made the following observation regarding prayer in general and vocal prayer in particular:

“To mutter something with the lips is not praying if one’s heart is not joined to it. To speak it is necessary first to have conceived interiorly what we wish to say. There is first the interior word, and then the spoken word, which causes what the interior has first pronounced to be understood. Prayer is nothing other than speaking to God. Now it is certain that to speak to God without being attentive to Him and to what we say to Him is something that is most displeasing to Him...God tests more the heart of the one who prays rather than the words pronounced by one who prays.” (Fiorelli, OSFS, Sermons on Prayer, p. 18)

Authentic prayer is not a matter of words. Authentic prayer is a matter of the heart, a heart whose stirrings must ultimately be displayed in actions.

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(February 17, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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“When God saw how they turned from their evil way, He repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them...”

Today’s reading from the Book of Jonah illustrates two things about God. First, God is just. God expects us to turn away from evil. God expects us to turn toward the good. Our failure to do so can result in clear and unambiguous consequences. Second, God’s justice toward us is outdone only by His mercy toward us. There appears to be no doubt that God is always prepared to give us the benefit of the doubt even if we are making only a modicum of progress in the love of God and neighbor.

Indeed, God is love, a love that tempers – that is, strengthens – justice with mercy.

It’s always tempting to get tough on other people who don’t measure up to our expectations. Ironically enough, this seems especially true in our relations with those we love the most. Perhaps their lack of progress isn’t because we aren’t being tough enough - perhaps it’s because we aren’t being merciful (that is, generous) enough.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: February 18th - February 24th

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(February 18, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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“Ask and it will be given...”

In today’s Gospel Jesus continues to give instruction on prayer. He tells us “everyone who asks, receives; the one who seeks, finds; to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”

In a sermon given on April 5, 1615, Francis de Sales made the following observation regarding asking for things in prayer:

“We have said that there are two kinds of goods for which we may ask in prayer: spiritual goods and corporal goods. There are two kinds of spiritual goods. One kind is necessary for our salvation: for these (faith, hope and charity) we ought to ask God simply and without condition, for he wants to give them to us. The other kind (ecstasies, raptures, spiritual comforts and consolations) – although also spiritual – we ought to ask for under the same rubric as corporal goods, namely, only if it is God’s will and if it is for His greater glory. Under these conditions we may ask for anything.” (Fiorelli, OSFS, Sermons on Prayer, p. 15)

Of course, when Jesus assures us that we will receive when we ask, we cannot assume that He means we will always receive precisely that for which we ask. Insofar as God does hear us, God will always answer our petitions, albeit not necessarily in accordance with our wishes. When God’s response does not appear to match our request, Francis encourages us to not become discouraged, since *“perfection does not consist in having these goods, but rather in having our will united to that of God. It is this that we may and ought to ask from the Divine Majesty continually and unconditionally.”* (*Ibid*, p. 16)

Referring to the order in which the petitions are ranked in the Lord’s Prayer, Francis notes:

“We ought to ask first that His Name be hallowed, that is to say, that He may be acknowledged and adored by all. Next, we must ask for what is most necessary for us, namely, that His Kingdom come for us, so that we may be inhabitants of Heaven. Third, we ask that His will be done. After these three requests we add, ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’ Jesus Christ makes us say, ‘Give us our daily bread,’ because under this word ‘bread’ are included all temporal goods.” (*Ibid*, pp. 16-17)

We’ve all heard the dictum, “Be careful what you pray for.” Jesus tells us something altogether different. He says: ask for anything, but be careful about the reasons for which you ask. Is it for your comfort and consolation or is it for God’s honor and glory?

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(February 19, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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“If the wicked, turning from the wickedness he has committed, does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life; since he has turned away from all the sins that he committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, St. Francis de Sales observed:

“Our Savior’s redemption touches our miseries and makes them more beneficial and worthy of love than original innocence could ever have been. The angels, says our Savior, have ‘more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just that have no need for repentance.’ So, too, the state of redemption is a hundred times better than that of innocence. Truly, by the watering of our Savior’s blood, made

with the hyssop of the cross, we have been restored to a white incomparably better than that possessed by the snows of innocence. Like Naaman, we come out of the stream of salvation more pure and clean than if we had never had leprosy. This is to the end that God's majesty, as he has ordained for us as well, should not be 'overcome by evil, but overcome evil by good'...(TLG, Book II, Chapter 5, pp. 115 – 116)

This display of God's generosity is nothing if not breathtaking. God loves us so much that not only does God not hold our sins against us if we should repent from our evil ways - God goes even further by applying his grace to our repentance in ways that can transform us into something more beautiful than if we had never committed sin in the first place! How generous is God? God can even turn our sins into a means of our salvation if we but trust in his unconditional and abiding love for us. But should this really surprise us? After all, have you ever noticed that some of the greatest of saints started out by being the greatest of sinners?

Are there any ways in which you are disfigured by the leprosy of sin? Don't be ashamed. Rather, be assured that God can transform your spiritual disfigurement into something – actually, someone – far more beautiful than you could ever have believed possible.

And God will effect something of this transformation even today!

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(February 20, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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"Be careful to observe them with all your heart and with all your soul..."

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

"Genuine, living devotion presupposes love of God, and hence it is simply true love of God. Yet it is not always love as such. Inasmuch as divine love adorns the soul it is called grace, which makes us pleasing to the Divine Majesty. Inasmuch as it strengthens us to do good, it is called charity. When it has reached a degree of perfection at which it not only makes us do good but also do this carefully, frequently and promptly, it is called devotion." (IDL, Part III, Chapter 30, p. 206)

Indeed, "Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!"

Carefully, frequently and promptly!

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(February 21, 2016: Second Sunday of Lent)

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"The Lord is my light and my salvation."

The Book of Genesis and the Gospel of Luke describe two very powerful scenes in which God's will is demonstrated in clear and unmistakable ways. Abram is presented with the mysterious smoking brazier as a sign of God's covenant with him and his descendants, while Peter, John and James witness the transfiguration of Jesus.

It is very difficult for to miss the message, because these scenes are direct manifestations and expressions of God's will, desire, hope and dream that all live a God-centered life on earth and experience the fullness of that life forever in heaven.

Would that God's will were always so cut and dry! Would that we could always easily discern God's will for us and for others! Would that we could know precisely what God wants from us in every moment with absolute clarity! Would that God would speak to everybody through transfiguring light or smoking braziers!

Of course, for most of us, this simply doesn't happen. Absent these kinds of communications, how, then, are we to discern God's will for us? Francis de Sales suggests a handful of things that can help us to recognize God's will in our lives...and how that will should affect our relationships with others.

First, *look to the Ten Commandments and other counsels found in Scripture; consider the tradition, the teaching, the practices and authority of the Church; pay attention to the duties and responsibilities that accompany you in your state and stage of life.* So, for example, if you are married, working and raising a family, God's will for you would include such things as keeping the Sabbath, honoring your own father and mother, nourishing your relationship with your spouse, providing for the needs and teaching of your children, doing your job in a gentle, just and ethical manner, balancing the demands of work and leisure, of home and the office, etc., etc.

Second, *look to the circumstances, situations and relationships* in which you find yourself each day, each hour, each moment. Pay attention to how the demands and needs of others might be expressions of God's will for you.

Third, *deepen your ability to listen.* Pay attention not only to what is going on around you, but also to what is going on inside of you. Learn how to identify and filter out the external and internal static in your life. Prayer and participation in the liturgical/sacramental life of the Church are two powerful allies in this effort.

Fourth, *develop and nurture solid spiritual friendships.* Just as God's will is never expressed in a vacuum, don't try to figure out everything all by yourself. Turn to the advice and counsel of trusted friends when trying to determine what God wants you to do in any given situation.

Finally, *be patient.* Trust in God's love for you. While God's revelations are occasionally quite unmistakable, most are much more subtle and revealed gradually - indeed, over a lifetime.

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(February 22, 2016: Chair of St. Peter, Apostle)

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On the web site of the *Catholic News Agency*, we find the following entry for the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter:

“The Feast of the Chair of St. Peter celebrates the papacy and St. Peter as the first bishop of Rome. St. Peter's original name was Simon. He was married with children and was living and working in Capernaum as a fisherman when Jesus called him to be one of the Twelve Apostles. Jesus bestowed to Peter a special place among the Apostles. He was one of the three who were with Christ on special occasions, such as the Transfiguration of Christ and the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemani. He was the only Apostle to whom Christ appeared on the first day after the Resurrection. Peter, in turn, often spoke on behalf of the Apostles.”

“When Jesus asked the Apostles: ‘Who do men say that the Son of Man is?’ Simon replied: ‘Thou art Christ, the Son of the Living God.’ And Jesus said: ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona: because flesh and blood have not revealed it to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I say to you: That you are Peter [Cephas, a rock],

and upon this rock [Cephas] I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever you shall loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven'. (Mt 16:13-20) In saying this Jesus made St. Peter the head of the entire community of believers and placed the spiritual guidance of the faithful in St. Peter's hands."

The post on the web site continues:

"However, St. Peter was not without faults..."

Now there's an understatement. No sooner does Jesus give Peter a big "shout out" for correctly identifying him as the Christ than Jesus publically – and severely – reprimands Peter for disputing Jesus' description of Himself as a suffering Messiah. Later, Peter rather lamely suggests erecting three tents while Jesus is transfigured on Mt. Tabor. Still later, Peter impetuously severs the ear of a slave belonging to one of the people who came to arrest Jesus at Gethsemani. Then, after protesting his love of Jesus at the Last Supper, Peter denied Jesus not once, not twice but three times. And, of course, while Jesus spent the last hours of his life hanging on the cross, Peter was nowhere to be found.

Jesus may have called Peter "rock," but the Savior knew he had cracks. While "Chair of Peter" speaks of stability, even Peter might be described as being "off his rocker" from time to time.

However, imperfect as Peter was, God entrusted the keys of the kingdom to him. And as imperfect as we are, Jesus continues to entrust those same keys – however obvious or innocuous – to each and every one of us.

As we celebrate the "Chair of Peter," don't forget that Jesus has likewise prepared a chair – a place, a role – for each and every one of us in continuing the work of God's Kingdom.

Like Peter, today do we have the courage to take our place?

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(February 23, 2016: Polycarp, Bishop and Martyr)

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"Let us set things right..."

In this selection from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah offers us some particularly appropriate and timely advice as we continue to journey through Lent. We are challenged to:

- Wash ourselves clean
- To put aside our misdeeds
- To cease doing evil
- To learn to do good
- To be willing to obey

In short, we are called to do the right thing.

Of course, we know from our own lived experience that as hard as we try to do the right thing, we don't always get it right. In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales offers us a practical example,

"I constantly advise you that prayers directed against and pressing anger must always be said calmly and peaceably, and not violently. Thus rule must be observed in all steps taken against evil. However, as soon as

you see that you are guilty of a wrathful deed, correct the fault right away by an act of meekness toward the person with whom you were angry. It is a sovereign remedy against lying to contradict the untruth upon the spot as soon as we realize that we have told one. So also we must repair our anger instantly by a contrary act of meekness. Fresh wounds are quickest healed, as the saying goes..." (IDL, Part III, Chapter 8, pp. 148-149)

What is the moral? When it comes to doing good, we can always try our level best to make things right at a later time in the event that we don't always get them right the first time. Lent might be a perfect time to do just that!

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(February 24, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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"What do you wish...?"

"What's in it for me?" On some level that's essentially what the mother of James and John is asking Jesus in today's Gospel story. Whether her sons put her up to it or she came up with it all by herself, she is basically asking, "Why should my sons follow you? What's the pay-off?" On the face of it, her request is perhaps reasonable, given Jesus' prediction of his own falling out with the chief priests and the scribes that will lead to his being condemned, mocked, scourged and crucified. She wants some guarantee that her boys will have something to show for their trouble that she intuitively will invariably come.

And really – what mother wouldn't be concerned?

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

"We must often recall that our Lord has saved us by his suffering and endurance and that we must work out our salvation by sufferings and afflictions, enduring with all possible meekness the injuries, denials and discomforts we meet." (IDL Part III, Chapter 3, p. 128)

There is no way around it – the experience of enduring injuries, denials and discomforts is part-and-parcel of the life that comes with drinking the chalice from which Jesus drinks. Following Jesus – he who is the Way, the Truth and the Life – isn't all smiles and sunshine. And somewhere deep down inside each of us, the mother of James and John whispers variations of her question to Jesus: "Why are you following Him? What's in it for you? What do you hope to get out of this?"

"Must good be repaid with evil?" Some days doesn't it sure feel that way? Be that as it may, why do we continue to follow Jesus? Why do we drink from the chalice from which He drank?

Today, ask yourself the question: "What's in it for me?"

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Spirituality Matters 2016: February 25th - March 2nd

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(February 25, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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“Remember that you received what was good during your lifetime...”

The parable in today’s Gospel does not require a great deal of explanation. Not to put too fine a point on it, but it is a warning - a stern warning. Acts have consequences; choices have ramifications; decisions have results. What goes around comes around and in a very big way.

However, take note of one detail in the story: the rich man who “dressed in purple and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day” is not condemned because of his good fortune – he is condemned because of his failure to share his good fortune with someone less fortunate.

Lent is not only a good time for us to reflect upon all the good – all the blessings – that God continues to shower upon us, but Lent is also a good time to consider how good we are – or aren’t – at sharing our goods with others.

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(February 26, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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“When his brothers saw that their father loved him best...they hated him...”

Our first reading today is a famous story from the Book of Genesis. It is a story of a family feud. It is a story of internecine jealousy. It is a story of unspeakable betrayal.

And in the end, it is a story of God’s unpredictable providence!

Joseph is his father’s favorite; his older brothers hate him for it. Blinded by their resentment and envy, they plot to murder Joseph. At the last moment, however, Reuben has second thoughts. He proposes that they essentially leave their brother to die in the desert (hoping that he might subsequently rescue his brother). At first blush, it seemed that Reuben’s plan might have worked until a caravan of foreigners appeared. Then, plan changed again: the brothers – even Reuben, by all accounts – decided to sell Joseph into slavery. This decision provided the brothers with an out - they didn’t actually take Joseph’s life, but they could get Joseph out of their lives nonetheless.

Twenty years later Israel finds itself in the grip of a devastating famine. At the end of their respective ropes, Joseph’s brothers travel to Egypt with the hope of finding food and shelter. Imagine their surprise – and their shame - when they find themselves face-to-face with the brother whom they had sold into slavery, presumably unto death.

There is a great mystery here to be considered. Absent his brothers’ treachery, Joseph’s kin – and presumably, Joseph himself – might have all been consumed by the famine that swept through Israel twenty years after selling their brother into slavery. How could anyone have anticipated that an act of betrayal could turn into a tale of salvation, forgiveness and reconciliation?

What’s the moral to the story? Sometimes in life good things happen for all the wrong reasons. Sometimes in life even the most loathsome of intentions can produce an inspired turn-of-events. Simply put, God can make miracles out of the worst of circumstances.

Today, reflect on this question: are there any examples of inspired turnoff-events in your own life in which something that you experienced as bad eventually helped to bring about something good?

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(February 27, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them..."

This statement is the resentment leveled against Jesus in today's selection from the Gospel of Luke. In response, Jesus proceeds to tell the Pharisees and scribes a parable: the parable of the prodigal son.

The word "prodigal" is defined as *"rashly or wastefully extravagant."* Well, that certainly describes the younger son to a tee. After all, he demands an inheritance (to which, as the younger son, he was not entitled) and promptly blows his entire fortune on irresponsible living.

The word "prodigal" is also defined as *"lavish in giving"*. Well, that certainly describes the father. After all, not only does he not rub the failure in his younger son's face – or treat him like a slave - but he welcomes him back, forgives him, and restores his place and position in the family.

The word "prodigal" is also defined as *"lavish in yielding"*. Well, that certainly relates to the older son, or more to the point, to the older son's struggle. The story ends with the father begging the older brother to let go of his resentment – to set aside his anger – toward his younger brother's return as well as toward his father's lavish celebration of the younger brother's return.

At this point in your life is there anything in that story to which you can really relate at this point in your life? At this point in your life, is there anyone in the parable with whom you can most closely empathize?

What is your answer? Why do you answer this way?

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(February 28, 2016: Third Sunday of Lent)

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"The place where you stand is holy ground."

An angel appeared to Moses in the fire, flaming from a bush, a bush that, no matter how long it burned, was not consumed. No doubt Moses couldn't believe his eyes. But if he was amazed with this revelation, imagine his surprise when he learned that he was standing in the presence of God.

Moses was on holy ground.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

"God is in all things and in all places. There is no place or thing in this world where God is not truly present... wherever we go or wherever we are we find God present." (II, 2, p. 84)

The truth of the matter is that we are always standing – and walking – on holy ground. Our world – and the people in it – is all created in the image and likeness of God. Our world – and the people in it – was saved by the life, the love, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our world – and the people in it – is inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Our world – and everything in it – is a gift from God. Therefore, it is worthy of profound respect and reverence. But how respectful are we? Do we treat our own bodies as holy ground? Do we relate to our environment as holy ground? Do we look at our gifts and material possessions as holy ground? Do we revere one another – and our relationships – as holy ground? In short, do we truly revere ourselves and one another, day in and day out, as a place in which we encounter the divine?

Moses removed his shoes in the presence of God as a sign of respect. We can show our respect and reverence for the presence of the divine in ourselves and one in another by removing more important things from our lives: envy, jealousy, gossip, deceit, gluttony, avarice, rage, violence, prejudice and anything else that prevents us from paying due respect to the God within us and among us.

But it is not enough to remove from our lives those thoughts, feelings, attitudes or actions that prevent us from recognizing the holy ground within us and within others. We must also embody the qualities enumerated in Psalm 103. We must...act with kindness and compassion...strive to secure justice...promote the rights of all (and any) oppressed...be merciful and gracious...slow to anger...abounding in kindness.

We stand, walk and live on holy ground, whether we are conscious of it or not.

Today, like that burning bush, may our thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions be a visible and convincing sign of this truth in our own lives - and in the lives of one another.

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(February 29, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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“If the prophet had told you to do something extraordinary, would you not have done it?”

Naaman – a great general and a foreigner – travels to far-off Samaria in the hope of being cured of his leprosy. This powerful man – a force with whom to be reckoned - is prepared to do whatever it takes, regardless of how superhuman or heroic, in order to curry favor with the God of Israel. When he finally reaches the home of Elisha, Naaman is told to simply wash seven times in the River Jordan. Period!

Naaman is furious! Such a remedy seems useless at best, insulting at worst. But then, someone in his retinue challenges his presumption that God can only work through extraordinary events and actions or that God is only interested in extraordinary events and actions. In effect, a servant says to Naaman, “You know, if the prophet had asked you to do something absolutely impossible, you would have done it in a heartbeat. When he asked you to do something incredibly ordinary instead, you can’t believe it. Get over it and go wash! Other than your pride, what do you have to lose?”

And the rest – as they say – is history.

There’s something of Naaman the Syrian inside each and every one of us. After all, don’t most of us – if not all of us – believe that if you really want something big – if you love somebody big-time – that you need to do something big in order to achieve something big – and that you have do something big in order to express your big-time love? Francis de Sales reminds us:

“Great opportunities to serve God rarely present themselves, but little ones are frequent.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 35, p. 215)

Are you looking to do something good for God today? Rather than waste your time waiting around for an opportunity to do something bigger than life, how about turning your attention to everyday life?

With big – that is, great – love!

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(March 1, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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“Let our sacrifice be in your presence today...”

This line from the reading from the Book of the Prophet Daniel would suggest that it is possible to sacrifice something without being in God’s presence. But it is not possible to sacrifice something apart from God’s presence because there is no place in this world in which God is not truly and fully present.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Although faith assures us of God’s presence we forget about him and behave as if God were far distant from us because we do not see him with our eyes. We really believe that God is present in all things, but because we do not reflect on this fact we act as if we did not believe it.” (IDL, Part II, Chapter 2, p. 84)

Whatever we might choose to offer and sacrifice to God today, just remember that our offerings and sacrifices are not intended to draw God’s attention to us. Rather, our offerings and sacrifices are designed to draw our attention to God!

Over and over again!

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(March 2, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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“Observe them carefully...”

What is it that we should be carefully observing? As we hear in the words on the lips of Moses from the Book of Deuteronomy today, it is God’s statutes and decrees that we are to observe carefully.

When we fail to observe God’s laws carefully – regardless of how large or how little God’s laws may be, as Jesus points out in today’s Gospel from Matthew – often times it is not because we are intentionally choosing to break them as much as – once again – we have managed to forget them, and in forgetting them we manage to lose sight of them altogether.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Blind men do not see a prince who is present among them, and therefore do not show him the respect they do after being told or reminded of his presence. However, because they do not actually see him, they easily forget his presence and having forgotten it, they still more easily lose the respect and reverence owed to him.” (IDL, Part II, Chapter 2, p. 84)

And in the effort to underscore the importance of doing carefully any worthwhile endeavor, recall Francis de Sales' very definition of devotion, that is, holiness:

“Genuine, living devotion presupposes love of God, and hence it is simply true love of God. Yet it is not always love as such. Inasmuch as divine love adorns the soul, it is called grace, which makes us pleasing to God. Inasmuch as it strengthens us to do good, it is called charity. When it has reached a degree of perfection at which it not only makes us do good but also to do good *carefully*, frequently and promptly, it is called devotion.” (*Ibid*, Part I, Chapter 1)

Today, do you want to make progress in observing carefully God's statutes and decrees? You can start - as the Book of Deuteronomy reminds us – by not allowing them to slip from your memory! As the saying goes, “Out of sight, out of mind.”

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Spirituality Matters 2016: March 3rd - March 9th

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(March 3, 2016: Katherine Drexel, Founder and religious)

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“If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts...”

If you ask a group of people the question, “What is the worst thing that can happen to the human heart?”, many folks will almost instinctively respond by answering, “When it breaks”.

However painful a broken heart may be, there is actually something far worse than can happen to a human heart: “When it hardens”.

The first reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah cites some characteristics or qualities frequently associated with hardening of the heart. These include:

- Not paying attention or heed
- Being disobedient
- Turning ones back on God and others
- Being stiff-necked
- Not listening
- Not answering
- Being unfaithful

And in the case of today's Gospel, we witness a particularly toxic variation on hardening of the heart: refusing to acknowledge the power of God at work in the lives of others, and also refusing to acknowledge that God can choose to work in the lives of others that often confound – and contradict – worldly wisdom.

Nobody wants a broken heart! However, a broken heart can serve as a kind of spiritual pulse. Wounded as we might be, at least having a heart capable of breaking can remind us that we are still alive! By contrast, a hardened heart ultimately leads to one thing and one thing only - death.

If you hear God's voice today, with what kind of heart will you listen?

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(March 4, 2016: Casimir)

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"You shall love your neighbor as yourself..."

In today's selection from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus cites what He considered to be the greatest or "first" commandment: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." But Jesus doesn't stop there. Without being asked, He cites a "second" commandment as well: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The order of the "loves" listed between the two "commandments" is noteworthy: love of God comes first, love of neighbor comes second and love of self comes last. Many people quietly confide to their most trusted friends that over the span of their lives, the person that they discovered it took the longest to love was themselves.

Are you having problems loving God? Are you having problems loving others? Maybe it's because you're having trouble loving yourself. "There is no commandment greater than these." In the case of the last, perhaps there is no commandment more difficult.

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(March 5, 2016: Lenten Weekday)

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"O God, be merciful to me, a sinner..."

We are told in today's Gospel that the man who identified himself as a sinner – and who asked for the mercy of God – is the one who "went home justified", unlike the Pharisee who in his smug self-absorption thanked God for making him better than most other people. While the latter puffed himself up, the former wasn't necessarily putting himself down, but rather, he was simply speaking the truth.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

"Nothing can so effectively humble us before the mercy of God as the multitude of his benefits. Nor can anything so much humble us before the justice of God as the enormity of our innumerable offenses. Let us consider what God has done for us and what we have done against Him; and as we reflect upon our sins – one by one – so let us consider his greater graces in the same order. What good do we have which we have not received from God? And if we have received it, why should we glory in it? On the contrary, the lively consideration of graces received makes us humble, insofar as knowledge of these graces should excite gratitude within us." (Select Salesian Subjects, 0048, p. 12)

The Pharisee and the tax collector are a study in contrast: the Pharisee's accounting left him arrogant and aloof, whereas the tax publican's accounting left him humble and grateful.

Who would you rather be today? What is your answer? Why do you answer this way?

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(March 6, 2016: Fourth Sunday of Lent)

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"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them..."

This action of Jesus is the source of the resentment leveled against Jesus in today's selection from the Gospel of Luke. In response, Jesus proceeds to tell the Pharisees and scribes a parable: the parable of the prodigal son.

The word "prodigal" is defined as *"rashly or wastefully extravagant."* Well, that certainly describes the younger son to a tee. After all, he demands an inheritance (to which, as the younger son, he was not entitled) and promptly blows his entire fortune – with all of his supposed friends – on irresponsible living.

The word "prodigal" is also defined as *"lavish in giving."* Well, that certainly describes the father. After all, not only does he not rub his younger son's face in his failure – or treat him like a slave - but he also welcomes him back, forgives him and restores his place and position in the family.

The word "prodigal" is also defined as *"lavish in yielding."* Well, that certainly describes the older son, or more to the point, the older son's struggle. The story ends with the father begging the older brother to let go of his resentment – to set aside his anger – toward his younger brother's return as well as toward his father's lavish celebration of the younger brother's return.

Taken together, Jesus is the ultimate "Prodigal Son." What could be more yielding than Jesus' willingness to take on the fullness of our humanity? What could be more lavish than Jesus' teaching, preaching, forgiving, and healing day in and day out? What could be more extravagant than Jesus' laying down his very life for us?

It turns out that – as far as God is concerned – there are many ways of being extravagant, lavish, giving and yielding in our relationships with others. How might God be inviting us to be his "prodigal" sons and daughters?

Today!

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(March 7, 2016: Perpetua and Felicity)

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"The man believed what Jesus said to him..."

In today's Gospel, a royal official – whose name we never learn – asked Jesus to save his son, who was apparently near death. Obviously, this request was going to involve some travelling on Jesus' part (upwards to a full day, as it turned out!), insofar as the official asked Jesus to "come down" – presumably, to their home – and heal his son. Much to the surprise of the official, Jesus simply tells him – without making the trip to actually visit the boy – that his son has already been saved.

And the official "believed what Jesus said to him." In other words, he took Jesus at his word...and headed home.

You don't think that his heading home immediately is a big deal? Then put yourself in the official's position. Can you imagine what was going through his mind, minutes - then hours - after beginning his long walk back home? He had lots of time to second-guess his decision to simply believe Jesus' statement. "What was I thinking about?" "Am I crazy?" "Should I have insisted that he come with me?" "Was I stupid to believe him?" "What if my son has died by the time I get home?" "Did I let my son – and my family – down?" "Have I failed?"

Talk about faith! A faith, as it turns out, for which he and his entire family were richly rewarded.

St. Francis de Sales once wrote:

“Believe me, God who has led you up until now will continue to hold you in His blessed hand, but you must throw yourself into the arms of His providence with complete trust and forgetfulness of self. Now is the right time. Almost everyone can manage to trust God in the sweetness and peace of prosperity, but only his children can put their trust in Him when storms and tempests rage: I mean to put their trust in Him with complete self-abandonment.” (Select Salesian Subjects, 0130, p. 28)

When it comes to “complete trust and forgetfulness of self”, the standard doesn’t get much higher than the one set by the royal official in today’s Gospel.

How does our trust in God today – especially in the midst of our own “storms and tempests” – measure up?

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(March 8, 2016: John of God)

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“Rise, take up your mat, and walk.”

A touching story in today’s Gospel from John. Jesus encounters a man who has been disabled virtually all his life. The man hopes to be healed by being immersed in the waters of a pool believed to hold miraculous power, but insofar as somebody else always manages to get to the pool ahead of him, his hopes for healing remain unfulfilled.

It’s remarkable what Jesus does for him. He doesn’t offer to carry the man over to the pool. He doesn’t offer to immerse the man into the pool. Jesus heals the disabled man on the very spot on which he had been marooned for nearly four decades.

Simply put, Jesus didn’t make the man work for His healing. Jesus didn’t make the man work for His love. Jesus administered his healing touch freely and without condition.

How often do we make someone work for our love before we decide to share it? How often do we make someone work for our healing touch before we choose to grant it? How often do we make someone crawl before we decide to help them to walk? That’s certainly not how God acts.

And why should we?

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(March 9, 2016: Frances of Rome)

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“For the LORD comforts his people and shows mercy to his afflicted...”

Today’s reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah paints the picture of a God who lifts up those who are weighed down. He is a God who clears a path for those burdened by the journey. He is a God who gives drink to the thirsty and food to the hungry. In short, our God goes out of His way to help those who are down and

out. In a world with its share of challenges, trials and difficulty, our God is a God who always lightens our load.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“We must take the greatest consolation from seeing how God exercises His mercy by the many diverse favors he distributes among angels and men – in heaven, and on earth – and how He exercises His justice by an infinite variety of trials and difficulties. Hence, death, affliction sweat and toil with which life abounds are by God’s justice the consequences of sin, but they are also by God’s sweet mercy ladders upon which to ascend to heaven, means by which to increase and grace and merits whereby to obtain glory. Indeed, blessed are poverty, hunger, thirst, sorrow sickness death and persecution: they are consequences of our humanity which nevertheless are so steeped and aromatized in God’s love, goodness and mercy that theirs is a most sweet bitterness.” (TLG Bk IX, Chapter 1, p.98)

Trials and difficulties are a part of life. Fortunately for us, God seizes these same trials and difficulties as opportunities to console us, support us, nourish us and sustain us.

How – in the name of this merciful, generous God – do we do the same for one another?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: March 10th - March 16th

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(March 10, 2016: Thursday, Fourth Week of Lent)

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“Moses, his chosen one, withstood him in the breach...”

Moses and Jesus have at least one thing in common: they were willing to go the wall for the people they cared about.

In Moses’ case, he dissuades God from punishing the Israelites out of anger for their infidelity. Moses puts his own life on the line in order to convince God to exercise mercy rather than justice. Moses is an advocate for his people.

In Jesus’ case, he continues to reach out to the poor and marginalized despite the growing hostility of the Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus puts His own life on the line in order to convince His religious peers to seek mercy rather than justice. Jesus is an advocate for His people.

How about us? Today, how far are we willing to go to be an advocate for others, especially for those most in need?

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(March 11, 2016: Friday, Fourth Week of Lent)

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“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted...”

Even a cursory reading of both the Old Testament and the New Testament demonstrates that Yahweh has a special place in His heart for the weak, the poor, the lonely, the disadvantaged, the marginalized, the exploited, the vanquished and the down-and-out. But there's more to Yahweh than this attitude. God also has plenty of room in His heart for the strong, the wealthy, the powerful, the streamlined, the victorious and the up-and-comers.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales remarked: "[The Apostle \(St. Paul\) says, 'Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.'](#)" (Part III, Chapter 1, p. 121) God finds room in his heart for all kinds of people and for all kinds of occasions. God's heart knows that it takes all kinds, all types and all times to promote His kingdom on this earth.

How much room do we have in our hearts? Are all welcomed?

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(March 12, 2016: Saturday, Fourth Week of Lent)

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"Does our law condemn a man before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing..."

It's very tempting to judge others by their appearance. It's very tempting to judge others by what others say about them. It's very tempting to judge others by first impressions.

Not only is it very tempting, but it is also very wrong. At least, in the eyes of God it is!

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

["How offensive to God are rash judgments. When the children of men pass judgment on others they usurp the office of our Lord. They are rash because every man has enough on which to judge himself without taking it upon himself to judge his neighbor. By judging our neighbor on every occasion, we never stop doing what is forbidden and we never do what is expected of us, that is, the challenge to judge ourselves."](#)

In another place, Scripture tells us this about God: "Not by appearance does He judge."

Today, as people made in God's image and likeness, can the same be said about us?

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(March 13, 2016: Fifth Sunday of Lent)

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"For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things..."

In her book Praying Our Goodbyes, Joyce Rupp writes:

"Goodbyes are a part of every single day. Sometimes we choose them, sometimes they choose us. Usually they are small, not so significant losses that do not pain us very much, but at times they are deep, powerful, wounding experiences that trail around our hearts and pain inside of us for years."

"Goodbyes, especially the more intense ones, cause us to face the ultimate questions of life: Why is there suffering? Where am I headed? What are my most cherished values? What do I believe about life after death? Goodbyes create a certain space in us where we allow ourselves room to look at life in perspective and to

gradually discover answers to some of those questions about life. We also learn a great deal about the significant others in our lives; we learn who is willing to walk the long road with us, whose heart always welcomes us no matter what, who loves us enough to stand with us in good times and in bad, who is willing to love us enough to speak the truth for us or to us. Goodbyes, when reflected upon in faith, can draw us to a greater reliance upon the God of love, our most significant other.” (p. 10; 12)

There is no doubt – because he tells us so – that Paul experienced a great deal of loss and change in his life. But his losses did not leave him with nothing. Rather, his losses helped him to realize one thing that he could never lose in the midst of all the give-and-take that comes with life – the love of Jesus Christ.

Of course, that’s not to say that the love of Jesus shielded Paul from the pain that comes from the inevitable changes and losses of life. After all, Paul tells us that he still struggles to forget what has been left behind. But the love of Jesus helps Paul to make sense of what has come – and gone - before, thus enabling him to focus on what lies ahead, to turn his attention on what is still to come.

Paul’s losses and goodbyes helped him to recognize in Jesus the most significant, dependable and loving “other” in his life.

What are our losses? How are we dealing with change? Where are our “goodbyes” taking us?

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(March 14, 2016: Monday, Fifth Week of Lent)

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“It’s not the crime; it’s the cover-up.”

“After the Watergate break-in, ‘quick action, resolution on the spot,’ could have saved President Nixon, said Prof. Michael Useem, an expert in business ethics at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

‘It was the inaction, the cover-up, that absolutely ruined his reputation in history forever,’ he said. Since the Nixon administration, a mantra repeated during many scandals has been, ‘It’s not the crime, it’s the cover-up.’”

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/01/business/choosing-whether-to-cover-up-or-come-clean.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>)

In today’s reading from the Book of the Prophet Daniel, we are presented with what might be considered as the Watergate scandal of the Old Testament: the story of Susanna. In short, two elders of the people attempted to have their way with her – the crime. When she resisted, they accused her of adultery – the cover-up. In effect, they sinned against Susanna twice by (1) attempting to physically assault her, and (2) by falsely assaulting her reputation. In the end, their crime – and perhaps even more so, the cover-up – results in their paying the ultimate price – death.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, St. Francis de Sales wrote:

“A soul that has consented to sin must have horror for itself and be washed clean as soon as possible out of the respect it must have for the eyes of God’s Divine Majesty who sees it. Why should we die a spiritual death when we have this sovereign remedy at hand?”(IDL, Part II, Chapter 19, p. 111)

Anyone can make a mistake. Why make it worse for yourself or others by covering it up?

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(March 15, 2016: Tuesday, Fifth Week of Lent)

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“We have sinned in complaining against the Lord...”

How quickly we forget.

In the first reading today from the Book of Numbers, we witness the complaining, whining and moaning of the Israelites as they continued their journey toward the Promised Land. Sure, the trek had been laborious; sure, the conditions were challenging; sure, the food and drink was less than desirable. But despite the fact that God had liberated them from the yolk of Egyptian slavery and oppression, the Israelites’ gratitude had clearly waned. Not only had they forgotten what God had done for them, but they also appear to have presumed that the pathway to freedom would be easy.

Dr. M. Scott Peck will probably be best remembered for the opening statement in his book The Road Less Travelled. The first chapter begins with these words: “Life is difficult.” Throughout much of his book the author maintains that a significant amount of human pain and grief is not the result of difficulties, but rather, much of the suffering and frustration that we experience is the direct result of our tendency to complain about life’s difficulties and our attempts to avoid them altogether. Such complaining and avoidance can lead to – among other maladies – a case of chronic ingratitude.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, St. Francis de Sales wrote:

“Complain as little as possible about the wrongs you suffer. Undoubtedly a person who complains commits a sin by doing so, since self-love always feels that injuries are worse than they really are...In the opinion of many – and it is true – constant complaining is a clear proof of lack of strength and generosity. (IDL, Part III, Chapter 3, p. 130)

On some level, we can all relate to the Israelites. We’ve all experienced tough times. We’ve all gotten bad breaks. We’ve all had our share of difficulties and disappointments. We’ve all had moments when we felt that the road to happiness shouldn’t take so much time, effort and energy. But we also know from our own experience that chronic complaining is toxic. It poisons our perceptions and perspectives, and it ultimately does nothing to address or reduce whatever difficulties we may be facing, be they real and/or imagined. In fact, chronic complaining simply makes things worse – for us, as well as for those around us.

Do you suffer from chronic complaining? If you do, then today try applying the surest remedy of all.

Gratitude!

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(March 16, 2016: Wednesday, Fifth Week of Lent)

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“The truth will set you free...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Our free will is never as free as when it is a slave to God’s will, just as it is never as servile as when it serves our own will. It never has so much life as when it dies to self, and never so much death as when it lives to itself. We have the liberty to do good and evil, but to choose evil is not to use but to abuse this liberty. Let us

renounce such wretched liberty and subject forever our free will to the rule of heavenly love. Let us become slaves to dilection, whose serfs are happier than kings. If our souls should ever will to use their liberty against our resolutions to serve God eternally and without reserve, Oh, then, for love of God, let us sacrifice our free will and make it die to itself so that it may live in God! A man who out of self-love wishes to keep his freedom in this world shall lose it in the next world, and he who shall lose it in this world for the love of God shall keep it for that same love in the next world. He who keeps his liberty in this world shall find it a serf and a slave in the other world, whereas he who makes it serve the cross in this world shall have it free in the other world. For there, when he is absorbed in enjoyment of God's goodness, his liberty will be converted into love and love into liberty, a liberty infinitely sweet. Without effort, without pain, and without any struggle we shall unchangingly and forever love the Creator and Savior of our souls. (Treatise 12: 10, pp- 277-278)

The Salesian tradition holds this truth about human freedom: it is not about being able to do whatever we want – that isn't freedom. No, that's license. True human freedom is about being able to do whatever it is that God wants us to do.

How might this truth set you free today?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: March 17th - March 23rd

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(March 17, 2016: Patrick, Bishop and Missionary)

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“You are to become the father of a host of nations...”

“Patrick was born in Britain of a Romanized family. At age 16 he was torn by Irish raiders from the villa of his father, Calpurnius, a deacon and minor local official, and carried into slavery in Ireland, where, during six bleak years spent as a herdsman, he turned with fervor to his faith. Hearing at last in a dream that the ship in which he was to escape was ready, he fled his master and found passage to Britain. There he came near to starvation and suffered a second brief captivity before he was reunited with his family. Thereafter, he may have paid a short visit to the Continent.”

“The best known passage in the *Confessio*, his spiritual autobiography, tells of a dream, after his return to Britain, in which one Victorinus delivered him a letter headed, “The Voice of the Irish.” As he read it, he seemed to hear a certain company of Irish beseeching him to walk once more among them. “Deeply moved,” he says, “I could read no more.” Nevertheless, because of the shortcomings of his education, he was reluctant for a long time to respond to the call. Even on the eve of embarkation for Ireland he was beset by doubts of his fitness for the task. Once in the field, however, his hesitations vanished. Utterly confident in the Lord, he journeyed far and wide, baptizing and confirming with untiring zeal. In diplomatic fashion he brought gifts to a kinglet here and a lawgiver there but accepted none from any. On at least one occasion, he was cast into chains. On another, he addressed with lyrical pathos a last farewell to his converts who had been slain or kidnapped by the soldiers of Coroticus.”

“The phenomenal success of Patrick's mission is not, however, the full measure of his personality. Since his writings have come to be better understood, it is increasingly recognized that, despite their occasional incoherence, they mirror a truth and simplicity of the rarest quality. Not since St. Augustine of Hippo had any religious diarist bared his inmost soul as Patrick did in his writings. As D.A. Binchy, the most austere critical

of Patrician (*i.e., of Patrick*) scholars, has put it, “The moral and spiritual greatness of the man shines through every stumbling sentence of his rustic Latin.” (<http://www.biography.com/people/st-patrick-9434729?page=1>)

What was said of Abraham is also applicable to Patrick. Each man in his own way became the “father” of a host of nations. Each man in his own way also mirrors Jesus by refusing to bring glory to himself in his daily attempts to follow God’s will and to be an instrument of God’s love in the lives of others.

How might we – in little, simple, ordinary ways – be as “fathers” and “mothers” not so much to a host of nations, but to the people with whom we will interact just this day?

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(March 18, 2016: Cyril of Jerusalem, Bishop/Doctor of the Church)

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“I hear the whisperings of many...”

The more things change, the more they stay the same, especially when it comes to one of the most common kind of all whisperings.

Slander.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, St. Francis de Sales wrote:

“Rash judgment begets uneasiness, contempt of neighbor, pride, self-satisfaction and many other extremely bad effects. Slander, the true plague of society, holds first place among them. I wish that I had a burning coal taken from the holy altar to purify men’s lips so that their iniquities might be removed and their sins washed away, as did the seraphim who purified Isaiah’s mouth. The man who could free the world of slander would free it if a large share of its sins and iniquity.”

“Slander is a form of murder. We have three kinds of life: spiritual, which consists in God’s grace; corporeal, which depends on the body and soul, and; social, which consists in our good name. Sin deprives us of the first kind of life, death takes away the second and slander takes away the third. By the single stroke of his tongue the slanderer usually commits three murders. He kills his own soul and the soul of anyone who hears him by an act of spiritual homicide and takes away the social life of the person he slanders.”

“I earnestly exhort you, never to slander anyone either directly or indirectly. Beware of falsely imputing crime and sins to your neighbor, revealing his secret sins, exaggerating those that are obvious, putting an evil interpretation on his good works, denying the good that you know belongs to someone, maliciously concealing it or lessening it by words. You would offend God in all these ways but most of all by false accusations and denying the truth to your neighbor’s harm. It is a double sin to lie and harm your neighbor at the same time.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 29, pp. 201-202)

What else need be said? Or, more to the point – what should no longer be said?

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(March 19, 2016: Joseph, Husband of Mary)

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“Joseph her husband was a righteous man...”

In a conference (The Virtues of St. Joseph) he gave to the Sisters of the Visitation, St. Francis de Sales remarked:

“Now, our glorious St. Joseph was endowed with four great virtues (constancy, perseverance, strength and valor) and practiced them marvelously well. As regards his constancy, did he not display it wonderfully when seeing Our Lady with child, and, not knowing how that could be, his mind was tossed with distress, perplexity and trouble? Yet, in spite of all, he never complained, he was never harsh or ungracious towards his holy Spouse, but remained just as gentle and respectful in his demeanor as he had ever been.....” (Living Jesus, p.184)

Joseph experienced more than a little turmoil in his role as husband and father of the Holy Family. However, being the just and righteous man that he was, Joseph never took out his frustrations on his wife or on his son. Rather, he accepted life’s ups and downs as expressions of God’s will for him.

And so we pray: God grant us the grace to imitate the example of St. Joseph. Help us to take whatever comes in life without taking it out on others – especially on those we love the most.

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(March 20, 2016: Passion/Palm Sunday)

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“The passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ...”

The Passion of Jesus is certainly an account of the end of his earthly life. But the Passion of Jesus is also something that was demonstrated every day of his earthly life.

- A passion for human justice.
- A passion for divine justice.
- A passion for doing what is right and good.
- A passion for challenging others to promote the same.

In his Treatise on the Love of God (Book 10, Chapter 16), St. Francis de Sales identifies three levels of such passion:

First, we can have a passion for correcting, censuring and reprimanding others. This is perhaps the easiest because it does not necessarily require those who are passionate about righteousness to actually perform acts of justice themselves. This form of zeal, obviously, can be very attractive because the focus is on what others are not doing. On the other hand, it can become a classic case of "do as I say, not as I do," because it does not require us to live in a just manner ourselves.

Second, we can be passionate "by doing acts of great virtue in order to give good examples by suggesting remedies for evil, encouraging others to apply them, and doing the good opposed to the evil that we wish to eradicate." “This holds for all of us," remarks de Sales, "but few of us are

anxious to do so." Sure, it requires work and integrity on our part. We can't simply talk the talk; we must also walk the walk.

"Finally, the most excellent exercise of passion consists in suffering and enduring many things in order to prevent or avert evil. Almost no one wants to exercise this passion." This passion is willing to risk everything for what is righteous and just, even life itself. "Our Lord's passion appeared principally in his death on the cross to destroy death and the sins of humanity," wrote St. Francis de Sales. To imitate Jesus' zeal for justice is "a perfection of courage and unbelievable fervor of spirit."

Jesus certainly challenged the injustice of others. Jesus was willing to promote justice through his own good example. Most importantly, Jesus was willing to go the distance in his passion for justice, even at the cost of his own life.

Passion Sunday - for that matter, every day - begs the question: How far are we willing to go in our passion for justice, that is, for what is right and good?

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(March 21, 2016: Monday, Holy Week)

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"Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my Spirit..."

Obviously, Jesus is the servant whom God upholds. Obviously, Jesus is God's servant. Obviously, Jesus is one upon whom God has put his Spirit.

Not so obvious? You, too, are the servant that God upholds. You, too, are God's chosen one. You, too, are one upon whom God has put his Spirit.

How might you be pleasing – not only to God, but also to other people – today?

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(March 22, 2016: Tuesday, Holy Week)

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"The Lord called me from birth; from my mother's womb he gave me my name..."

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

"Consider that a certain number of years ago you were not yet in the world and that your present being was truly nothing. My soul, where were you at that time? The world had already existed for a long time, but of us there was yet nothing. God has drawn you out of that nothingness to make you what you now are and he has done so solely out of his own goodness and without need

of you. Consider the nature God has given you. It is the highest in this visible world. It is capable of eternal life and of being perfectly united to his Divine Majesty.” (Part I, Chapter 9, p. 53)

From all eternity God chose to create us out of nothing and to make us something...to make us someone. What return can we make other than to stand in awe of God’s generosity towards us?

And to live accordingly!

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(March 23, 2016: Wednesday, Holy Week)

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“The Lord GOD is my help...”

Today’s reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah paints the picture of a God who lifts up those who are weighed down. He is a God who clears a path for those burdened by the journey. He is a God who gives comfort in times of adversity. In short, our God goes out of His way to help those who are down and out. In a world with its share of challenges, trials and difficulties, our God is a God who lightens the load.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“We must take the greatest consolation from seeing how God exercises His mercy by the many diverse favors he distributes among angels and men – in heaven, and on earth – and how He exercises His justice by an infinite variety of trials and difficulties. Hence, death, affliction sweat and toil with which life abounds are by God’s justice the consequences of sin, but they are also by God’s sweet mercy ladders upon which to ascend to heaven, means by which to increase and grace and merits whereby to obtain glory. Indeed, blessed are poverty, hunger, thirst, sorrow sickness death and persecution: they are consequences of our humanity which nevertheless are so steeped and aromatized in God’s love, goodness and mercy that theirs is a most sweet bitterness.” (TLG Bk IX, Chapter 1, p.98)

Trials and difficulties are a part of life. Fortunately for us, God sees these same trials and difficulties as opportunities to console us, support us, nourish us and sustain us.

How – in the name of this merciful, generous God – do we do the same for one another?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: March 24th - March 30th

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(March 24, 2016: Mass of the Lord’s Supper)

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“Do you realize what I have done for you?”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales observed:

“God has signified to us in so many ways and by so many means that he wills all of us to be saved that no one can be ignorant of this fact. For this purpose he made us ‘in his own image and likeness’ by creation, and by the Incarnation he has made himself in our image and likeness, after which he suffered death in order to ransom and save humankind. He did this with so great a love...” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 3, p. 128)

While we may not be “ignorant” of what God has done for us (beautifully ritualized in the upper room at the Last Supper and dramatically demonstrated on the hill of Calvary), how much time – on any given day, in any given hour – do we spend reminding ourselves of how “great a love” God has for us?

Even to this very moment!

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(March 25, 2016: Good Friday)

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“He learned obedience from what he suffered...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Our Savior himself has declared, ‘By our patience you will win your souls.’ It is man’s greatest happiness to possess his own soul, and the more perfect our patience the more completely do we possess our souls. We must often recall that our Lord has saved us by his suffering and endurance and that we must work out our salvation by sufferings and afflictions, enduring with all possible meekness the injuries, denials and discomforts we meet.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 3, p. 128)

Jesus learned obedience by what he suffered. He learned to listen to the voice of his Father by his practice of endurance, that is, through his willingness to see things through to the end. In so doing, he experienced the happiness and joy that even his suffering and death could not vanquish.

What kind of cross – be it injury, denial or discomfort – might God ask us to carry today? Are we up to the task?

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(March 26, 2016: Easter Vigil)

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“God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote: “When he created things God commanded plants to bring forth their fruits, each one according to its kind. In like manner he commands Christians – the living plants of the Church – to bring forth the fruits of devotion, each according to one’s position and vocation...” (Part I, Chapter 3, p. 43)

Even before God created things – including us – God intended to underscore his love for the created order by becoming one of us in the person of his Son. Francis de Sales believed that it was the Incarnation that became

the motivation for Creation. Thus, Creation made possible the ultimate expression of God's love for the universe: the Word Made Flesh, Jesus Christ. Because of "The Fall" the Incarnation took on an additional purpose: to save us from our sins.

Tonight's readings from Scripture testify to the fidelity of God's creative, incarnational and redeeming love. Throughout all the ups and downs of human history, one constant has remained: God's love for us. A love to the death...a love all about life.

Today, how can we show our gratitude for so wonderful – and faithful – a love? The answer - by bringing forth the fruits of devotion! In so doing, we continue the creative, incarnational and redemptive action of the God who loved us before the creation – and redemption – of the world.

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(March 27, 2016: Easter Sunday, Resurrection of the Lord)

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"Let us celebrate the feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

"The death and passion of our Lord is the sweetest and the most compelling motive that can animate our hearts in this mortal life...The children of the cross glory in this, their wondrous paradox which many do not understand: out of death, which devours all things, has come the food of our consolation. Out of death, strong above all things, has issued the all-sweet honey of our love." (Treatise on the Love of God, Book 12, Chapter 13)

This mystery, indeed, is the central mystery of our faith. Jesus, by allowing himself to be consumed with passion and swallowed up by death has, in turn, conquered death once and for all with the passion that is the power of eternal life.

Christ's pathway of passion, death and resurrection was personal. It was unique. It had been fashioned by the Father from all eternity. Jesus was faithful to God's vision for him. Jesus embraced his vocation as the humble, gentle Messiah. Jesus suffered the pain of death. Jesus experienced the power of rising again.

God has fashioned a personal path for each of us from all eternity. Each one of us has a unique role to play in the Father's never-ending revelation of divine life, love, justice, peace and reconciliation. Still, the way to resurrection is the way of the cross – the way of giving up, of letting go, of surrendering all things, thoughts, attitudes and actions that prevent us from embodying the passion of Christ - the passion for all that is righteous and true.

Francis de Sales offers this image in Book 9 of his Treatise on the Love of God: "God commanded the prophet Isaiah to strip himself completely naked. The prophet did this, and went about and preached in this way for three whole days (or, as some say, for three whole years). Then, when the time set for him by God had passed, he put his clothes back on again. So, too, we must strip ourselves of all affections, little and great, and make a frequent examination of our heart to see if it is truly ready to divest itself of all its garments, as Isaiah did. Then, at the proper time we must take up again the affections suitable to the service of charity, so that we may die naked on the cross with our divine Savior and afterwards rise again with him as new people."

Be certain of one thing - the daily dying to self that is part of living a passionate life is not about dying, i.e., stripping and letting go for its own sake. The goal is that we may be purified to live more lives of divine passion faithfully and effectively. God does not desire that we die to self out of self-deprecation. God desires that we die to self in order that, ironically, we may become more of the person God calls us to be.

“Love is as strong as death to enable us to forsake all things,” wrote St. Francis de Sales. “It is as magnificent as the resurrection to adorn us with glory and honor.”

This glory and honor is not just reserved for heaven. To the extent that we die a little each day and experience the fidelity of God’s love in the midst of all adversity, trials, struggles and “letting go” - something of these gifts can be ours even here on earth.

Beginning today!

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(March 28, 2016: Monday, Octave of Easter)

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“Do not be afraid...”

“Terrible thing, to live in fear. Brooks Hatlen knew it. Knew it all too well. All I want is to be back where things make sense. Where I won’t have to be afraid all the time...” (Morgan Freeman as Ellis Boyd Redding in *The Shawshank Redemption*.)

In a letter he wrote to Jane de Chantal on the 6th of August 1606, Francis de Sales gave the following counsel:

“St. Peter, seeing that the storm was raging, was afraid. As soon as he was frightened, he began to sink and to drown, leading him to cry out: ‘O Lord, save me.’ Our Lord caught hold of his hand and said to him: “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’ Look at this holy apostle; he walks dry foot on the water, the waves and the winds could not make him sink, but fear of the wind and waves will make him perish unless his master saves him. Fear is a greater evil than the evil itself. O daughter of little faith, what do you fear? No, do not be afraid; you are walking on the sea, surrounded by wind and water, but you are with Jesus: so what is there to fear?” (Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 125)

What is there to fear? Great question! Perhaps that question is the first step to not being afraid. Perhaps that question is also the first step to avoid living in fear: to name what it is that you are tempted to fear.

Does that make sense to you?

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(March 29, 2016: Tuesday, Octave of Easter)

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“You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...”

In today’s selection from the Acts of the Apostles we hear St. Peter speaking of the gift – *singular* – of the Holy Spirit! Generally speaking we are used to speaking of the gifts – *plural* – of the Holy Spirit. Sounds strange to us, but not to St. Francis de Sales! In his Treatise on the Love of God, he wrote:

“The glorious St. Paul speaks thus, ‘But the fruit of the spirit is charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, long-suffering, mildness, faith, modesty, constancy and chastity.’ Theotimus, see how this divine Apostle enumerates these twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit but sets them down as only one fruit. He does not say ‘The fruits of the Spirit are charity, joy’ but ‘the fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy...’ The meaning of this manner of expression is this: ‘The charity of God is poured forth into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has

been given to us.' Charity is truly the sole fruit of the Holy Spirit, but this one fruit has an infinite number of excellent properties..." (TLG, Book XI, Chapter 19, p. 251)

In the big scheme of things, it is fair to say that the fundamental gift (singular) of the Holy Spirit is love - pure and simple. As Francis de Sales reminds us, however, this single gift has an "infinite number of excellent properties."

As temples of the Holy Spirit – as dwelling places of the Spirit’s gift of love – how many of the excellent properties associated with this one gift will we exhibit in our relationships with other people?

Today!

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(March 30, 2016: Wednesday, Octave of Easter)

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"I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give to you..."

This simple phrase spoken by Peter in today’s selection from the Acts of the Apostles serves as a simple shorthand for the Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." (Matthew 5: 3 – 11)

Being poor in spirit requires that we do three things. First, we need to acknowledge our poverty; we need to name that which we lack. Second, we need to acknowledge our wealth; we need to name that which we possess. Third, we need to be willing to share our possessions – be they little or great – with others. Taken together, these steps can help us to be generous people.

Peter named his poverty; he named what he lacked. However, he was just as quick to state that he willingly shared with others what he did possess. As the Acts of the Apostles clearly demonstrates, Peter was a generous person in his service to Jesus’ mission and to God’s people!

How about us? How comfortable are we with acknowledging what we don’t have? By the same token, how comfortable are we with acknowledging what we do have...and most importantly, how willing are we to share what we have with others?

Be it little, great or something in between!

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Spirituality Matters 2016: March 31st - April 6th

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(March 31, 2016: Thursday, Octave of Easter)

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"The disciples recounted how they had come to recognize him in the breaking of bread..."

"Breaking bread..." Sharing food, sharing drink, sharing a meal. Something so simple, but it is in the context of such a common, ordinary, everyday human experience that the Risen Christ reveals himself!

Of course, “breaking bread” isn’t just about food and drink. It speaks of relationship; it speaks of intimacy; it speaks of welcoming another; it speaks of being at home with another; it speaks of sharing who we are with another.

In the space of any given week how many times do we ‘break bread’ with others? Ever stop to think how the Risen Christ may be trying to reveal something of himself in the context of these common, ordinary and everyday human experiences in extraordinary ways?

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(April 1, 2016: Friday, Octave of Easter)

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“Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples...”

Familiar with the term “one-hit wonder?”

“A one-hit wonder is a person or act known mainly for only a single success. The term is most often used to describe music performers with only one hit single. Some one-hit wonders are the result of novelty songs during fads. Examples include Rick Dees’ "Disco Duck", related to the disco craze of the 1970s; C. W. McCall's "Convoy", related to the CB radio craze of the 1970s; and Buckner & Garcia’s "Pac-Man Fever", related to the 1980s-era arcade game Pac-Man.”

“Some artists, such as the Big Bopper, had their careers cut short by death (in the Big Bopper's case, in a fatal plane crash that also killed two other musicians), while others, such as New Radicals and The La's, broke up immediately after their one hit. In the 1960s and early 1970s, session bands such as Edison Lighthouse or Alive N Kickin' producing just a single 45 record were common. More commonly, however, one-hit wonders are serious-minded musicians who struggled to continue their success after their popularity waned.” (*Wikipedia*)”

When it came to post-Resurrection appearances, Jesus was no one-hit wonder. Between the time of his Resurrection and his Ascension, Scripture records at least ten distinct appearances at different places, different times and to different people. Jesus spoke to, ate and drank with and embraced a wide swathe of people during these appearances - some small and intimate, others large and public.

Of course, our Catholic-Christian tradition contains countless accounts of how the Risen Jesus continues to reveal himself in the lives of ordinary people in everyday circumstances. Put another way, when it comes to post-Resurrection appearances, the hits keep coming.

Today, how might the Risen Jesus reveal himself to you? And also today, how might the Risen Jesus reveal himself to others through *you*?

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(April 2, 2016: Saturday, Octave of Easter)

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“Perceiving them as uneducated, ordinary men, the leaders, elders and scribes were amazed [at] the companions of Jesus...”

Recall the words of Jesus in Chapter 11:25 of Matthew’s Gospel: “I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the clever, and you have revealed them to children...”

William Barclay made the following observation about Jesus' statement:

“Jesus is speaking out of his own experience, the experience that the Rabbis and the wise men rejected him, and the simple people accepted him. The intellectuals had no use for him; the humble welcomed him. We must be careful to see clearly what Jesus meant here. He is very far from condemning intellectual power; what he is condemning is intellectual pride. As Plummer has it, ‘The heart – not the head – is the home of the Gospel.’ It is not cleverness which shuts out; it is pride. It is not stupidity which admits; it is humility. A man may be as wise as Solomon, but if he lacks the simplicity, the trust and the innocence of the childlike heart, he shuts himself out.” (Daily Study Bible, *Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2*, pp. 13 – 14)

Francis de Sales tells us that love of knowledge is a good thing. However, knowledge is only valuable to the extent that it empowers us to love. It's not enough to know about God – we are invited to love God.

And to love one another!

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(April 3, 2016: Second Sunday of Easter/Divine Mercy Sunday)

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“Doubting Thomas” is an image—a moniker—that has remained part of our language nearly two thousand years after the (in) famous post-Resurrection interaction between St. Thomas the Apostle and the risen Jesus.

We know by now that St. Francis de Sales drew upon many sources in order to proclaim the redeeming and transforming nature of God's love. No surprise, then, that the “Gentleman Saint” gleans some valuable insights and lessons from the life—and the most well-known moment in the life—of this Apostle.

In a sermon preached at the Visitation community in Lyons a week before his own death, St. Francis de Sales began:

“Historians of our day, when they discuss famous people, have a habit of hiding the truth and drawing a veil over evil, making these authors far from trustworthy. By contrast, the Holy Spirit speaks the truth without fear or favor. It is the normal practice of Holy Scripture to reveal frankly the sins of many very holy people. When the Spirit wishes to point to the forgiveness of Mary Magdalene, or to the tears of St. Peter, or to the conversion of St. Paul, for example, it recalls their faults before recognizing their repentance. It is the same with St. Matthew and others, especially St. Thomas.”

Not to be too hard on “Doubting Thomas,” Francis de Sales quickly reminds us that the “gravity of his fault only throws into even greater relief the infinite mercy of God compared to the unworthiness of sinners. Gods reigns in our wretchedness, so Scripture tells us.”

Doubtless, we can all relate!

So, what are the lessons that Francis de Sales gleaned from the story of St. Thomas?

“His first mistake was his failure to be present with the others. It is important to notice that no person achieves perfection in one leap, but bit by bit; similarly, no one falls from grace in a moment, but by little faults is led to greater. It is not for us to make light of being absent from the community at prayer or other exercises; if St. Thomas had been with the other apostles, he would have been a saint and a believer eight days sooner. Don't think that a few days more or less make little difference: moments are precious, and we should hoard them.”

What was Thomas' second mistake?

“His refusal to believe when his companions told him: We have seen the Lord. He should have pressed the other apostles about the Savior's appearance, and rejoiced with them at their good fortune. The pity is that he did just the opposite, and even went so far as to refuse to admit that he was in the wrong anywhere. All of us share this fault: if we make a mistake, we are unwilling to admit it. The one who makes excuses is his or her own accuser...”

What was his third mistake?

Thomas “became stubborn and made wild, obstinate statements...St. Thomas was simply carried away by his passions: such behaviors, theologians tell us, can lead to mortal sin.”

And yet, for all that, God was not finished with Thomas. Because of God's boundless mercy, this doubting apostle got a second bite at the apple. Jesus appeared to Thomas, and “he placed his fingers into the sacred wounds of his Savior.” And this one who had so strenuously doubted became a great herald of the Risen Christ...and was martyred for his faith.

Unlike Thomas, we need to take even more on faith. We don't have the same luxury that St. Thomas did as he saw Jesus with his own eyes, both before and after Calvary. Nevertheless, for all our doubts or stubbornness we can be transformed by the eyes of faith.

For many of us seeing is – indeed – believing. May others believe in Jesus' love for them by what they see in us!

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(April 4, 2016: Annunciation of the Lord)

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“Ask for a sign from the Lord your God...”

Who wouldn't jump at the chance of making such a request of God? Who wouldn't say “yes” to the opportunity for God to display His power for us and/or for someone whom we love? Yet, in today's selection from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Ahaz balks when given the opportunity of a lifetime: he takes a pass. He backs away, saying, “I will not tempt the Lord.”

Perhaps Ahaz's reluctance to ask for a sign is rooted in an intuition that signs from the Lord often require changes in the one who asks for signs in the first place! Under those circumstances, his circumspection makes a great deal more sense. Remember the admonition? “Be careful what you pray for...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Devout discussions and arguments, miracles and other helps in Christ's religion do indeed make it supremely credible and knowable, but faith alone makes it believed and known. It brings us to love the beauty of its truth and to believe the truth of its beauty by the sweetness it diffuses throughout our will and the certitude it gives to our intellect. The Jews saw our Lord's miracles (signs) and heard his marvelous doctrines, but since they were not disposed to accept the faith, that is, since their wills were not susceptible to the sweet and gentle faith because of the bitterness and malice with which they were filled, they remained in their infidelity. They saw the force of the proof but they did not relish its sweet conclusion...” (TLG, II, Chapter 14, pp. 139 – 140)

As people of faith, we should feel free to ask God for signs; however, we must be prepared to consider - and follow - the directions in which those signs may challenge us to go. Divine signs aren't meant to occur in a vacuum – they are meant to change our minds, hearts, attitudes and actions.

(OR)

“Do not be afraid, Mary...”

In a letter he wrote to an “Unnamed gentleman”, Francis de Sales made the following observation:

“We do not always have to feel strong and courageous; it is enough to hope that we will have strength and courage when and where we need them...So now, since you belong entirely to God, why be afraid of your weakness – on which, in any case, you shouldn't be relying? You do hope in God, don't you? And will anyone who hopes in Him ever be put to shame? No, never. I beg you, calm all the objections that might be taking shape in your mind and to which you need give no other answer than that you want to be faithful at all times and that you hope God will see to it that you are, without trying to figure out if He will or not.” (LSD, p. 181-182)

Mary was troubled by the angel's message. Her mind was awash with questions about what this greeting meant for her. There's no doubt that she was startled; perhaps, she was initially even afraid. But she worked through her fear; she did not allow herself to be overwhelmed by any objections that might have been forming in her mind. Putting her hope, faith and trust in God, Mary was able to simply say “yes” to God's invitation to her to become the mother of the Messiah. For His part, God gave Mary the ability to be faithful at all times.

Today, like Mary, how might you need to place your hope in God?

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(April 5, 2016: Vincent Ferrer, Priest)

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“The community of believers was of one heart and mind...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“By the Word,’ St. John said, that is, by that eternal Word who is the Son of God, ‘all things were made.’ Therefore, since this Word is most simple and most single, it produces all the variety among things. Since it is unchanging, it produces all changes that are good. Finally, since it abides eternally, it gives to all things their succession, changes, order rank and season.” (TLG, Book II, Chapter 2, p. 106)

De Sales reminds us of one very important aspect of any community and/or family - diversity! While the early Christian “community of believers” may have been of one heart and mind, it's tough to imagine that this oneness could be achieved without its share of challenges, conflicts and controversy. The fact that community always has its share of diversity begs the question: “What distinguishes a community that is “of one heart and mind” from one that is not? Perhaps it's the ability – and the willingness – to agree on the things or values in life that really matter in order to build consensus around the issues that are really worth honoring as non-negotiables.

Today, consider: how does our community measure up?

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(April 6, 2016: Wednesday, Easter Weekday)

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“Whoever lives the truth comes to the light so that his works may be clearly seen...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“When our mind is raised above the natural light of reason and begins to see the sacred truth of faith, O God, what joy ensues! As yet we do not see his face in the clear day of glory, but as it were in the first dawn of the day. If divine truths are so sweet when proposed in the obscure light of faith, O God, what shall those truths be like when we contemplate them in the noonday light of glory! We will see God manifest with incomprehensible clarity the wonders and eternal secrets of his supreme truth and with such light that our intellect will see in its very presence what it had believed here below!” (TLG, Book III, Chapter 29, pp. 189-190)

Living in the light of God’s truth enables us to see God’s works clearly in our lives. May our attempts at living in the light of God’s truth also enable other people to see our works clearly in their lives! After all, while we do walk by faith, we also walk by sight!

Today, how does what people see in me give witness to the truth of what God sees in all of us?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: April 7th - April 13th

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(April 7, 2016: John Baptist de la Salle, Priest and Founder)

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“The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things...”

In his Introduction to the devout Life, Francis de Sales observed:

“The Holy Spirit does not dwell in a deceitful and tricky soul. No artifice is as good and desirable as plain dealing. Worldly prudence and carnal artifice belong to the children of this world, but the children of God walk a straight path and their hearts are without guile.”(III, 30, p. 206)

As children of God, what kinds of things will we speak of today?

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(April 8, 2016: Friday, Easter Weekday)

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“What good are these for so many?”

Overwhelmed by the size and scope of the needs of the throng gathered before them, we can understand the skepticism of Philip and the other disciples regarding Jesus announced desire to feed the “large crowd.” You

can hear it in their voices. Does Jesus really know what he's up against? Does Jesus really grasp the situation? Is Jesus – perhaps – out of touch with the enormity of the challenge – and potential disaster – lying before him? Was it possible that Jesus had been out in the sun too long?

In light of this dynamic consider this question: was the miracle that Jesus subsequently – and convincingly – performed solely for the benefit of the “five thousand”? In addition to meeting the physical hunger of “the large crowd,” perhaps Jesus performed this miracle for the benefit of “the twelve”. What is the lesson? When faced with the needs of others do not discount what you bring to the table, regardless of how small or underwhelming it may appear. As overwhelming as the hungers of other people may be, we'll never know how much – or how little – we can do for them unless we first try.

What good am I for so many? Remember to let Jesus weigh in on that question.

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(April 9, 2016: Saturday, Easter Weekday)

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“It is I. Do not be afraid.”

In a letter of spiritual direction, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Do not let us be anxious about the storms and tempests which sometimes rage in our hearts and rob us of our calm. Let us mortify our spirit utterly, and as long as our beloved faith holds firm, even if everything else comes crashing down around us, we shall yet live secure. Provided that God lives in us, what need we care if everything else dies in us? Let us go on steadily: we are on the right road. Do not look either right or left; no, this is the best road for us. Do not let us waste time thinking how attractive the other roads look, but let us just salute those who pass along other roads, saying quite simply to them: may God guide us so that we may all meet at home.”(Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 132-133)

Every life has its share of storms and tempests. Every life has its share of crises. Every life has its moments of fear. In times like these, we should take consolation in these words from St. Francis de Sales:

“God, who does nothing in vain, does not give us either strength or courage when we don't need them, but only when we do. He never fails us. Consequently, we must always hope that He will help us if we entreat Him to do so...Many are afraid before the skirmish, but the actual danger fills them with courage. We must not be afraid of fear...” (LSD, p. 181)

In the midst of the storms, tempests, crises that are a part of every life, perhaps one of the greatest remedies against fear is to remind ourselves that we do not face these storms, tempests and crises alone.

God is with us!

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(April 10, 2016: Third Sunday of Easter/Divine Mercy Sunday)

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“When you grow old someone else will lead you where you do not want to go.” (from JN 21: 1 – 19)

Let's face it: we'd like to be in charge of our own lives. We like to do what we want, when we want, where we want and how we want. Given a choice, we would prefer to be the masters of our own destiny. Nowhere is this so obvious than in our teenage years and in our experience as young adults.

This attitude touches every dimension of life - even our spiritual life. St. Francis de Sales wrote the following to St. Jane de Chantal: *“Young apprentices in the love of God gird themselves; they take on the mortifications that they think are good; they choose a penance of their liking; they choose resignation and devotion of their own design.”* (Stopp, *Selected Letters*, p. 203)

However, gradually, a funny thing - and, sometimes, a not-so-funny thing - happens. We begin to learn some hard lessons about life. We learn that we don't have absolute control; we learn that we don't always have the first word, let alone get the last one. We learn that some of the best things in life are not of our own making, but are the designs of others.

This lesson, too, applies to every dimension of our lives, including the spiritual: *“The older masters of the trade allow themselves to be bound and girt by others, submitting to the yoke given to them by others, and finding themselves following the kinds of roads that they would not choose by their own inclinations. They stretch forth their hands: they willingly allow themselves to be governed by a will other than their own...this is how to give glory to God.”* (Ibid)

Francis de Sales offers a touching insight into his own struggle with this truth in a letter to Sr. Marie Ammie: *“I am a poor, frightened little creature, the baby of the family, timid and shy by nature and completely lacking in self-confidence. That is why I should like people to let me live unnoticed and all on my own according to my own inclination.”* He continued: *“When I was young and still had very little understanding I already lived like this; but although according to my temperament I am shy, nervous and timid as a mole, I want to make a good try at overcoming my natural preferences and, little by little, learn to do everything...that God has laid upon me.”* (*Selected Letters*, page 242)

One might say that the secret to happy, healthy and holy living is to embrace the wisdom of age with the passion of our youth: to follow God's will for us rather than to stubbornly cling to our own, but to do this as passionately and persistently as if it were naturally or clearly our own preferences that we were pursuing.

This way of living is not weakness. No, it is real strength. Christ's willingness to follow the will of his Father for him - difficult as it frequently was - unleashed in Jesus incredible power for life and love, justice and peace, healing and reconciliation. The promise of Easter is that the same power is available to us, provided that it is God's plan, not ours, which we follow.

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(April 11, 2016: Stanislaus, Bishop and Martyr)

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“Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord...”

In today's Gospel (JN 6: 22-29), the question is asked of Jesus, “What can we do to accomplish the works of God?” The answer is found in the antiphon to today's Responsorial Psalm: “Follow the law of the Lord.”

What does it look like when we follow the law of the Lord? In the mind of St. Francis de Sales, the answer is: “Living a life of devotion.”

“Devotion is simply that spiritual agility and vivacity by which charity works in us or by the aid of which we work quickly and lovingly. Just as the function of charity is to enable us to observe all of God's

commandments (the law of the Lord) in general and without exception, so it is the part of devotion to enable us to observe them more quickly and diligently.” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 1, p. 40)

Devotion enables us to follow the law of the Lord. Devotion enables us “to do quickly and lovingly as many good works as possible, both those commanded and those merely counseled or inspired.” (Ibid) Such devotion enables us to experience the blessings of life for ourselves; this same devotion enables us to be a blessing in the lives of others.

Today, how might we follow the law of the Lord?

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(April 12, 2016: Tuesday, Third Week of Easter)

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“What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you?” (JN 6: 30 – 35)

Jesus was constantly bombarded with requests for signs. People were constantly looking for reasons to put their faith in Jesus, but they wanted him to perform wonders and miracles in order to be convinced. During his ministry, Jesus gave people more than enough signs for believing in him. Unfortunately, those signs fell on the deaf ears, blind eyes and hard hearts of people who were basically saying to Jesus: “Sure, but what have you done for me lately?”

Aren’t we sometimes guilty of asking God for a favor, a sign or a wonder in order that we might really, really believe in him? Notwithstanding God’s proven track record of mercy and generosity in our regard, aren’t we sometimes guilty of saying to God, in effect: “Sure, but what have you done for me lately?”

What remedy then, can we apply to the temptation of constantly asking God for signs in order that we might believe in him? How about asking the question, “What signs can we do in order that others may see and believe in him?” How can we live our lives in ways that help others to believe in God? Rather than asking God for signs, we should be asking to be signs in other people’s lives!

What have we done for God – or others – lately?

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(April 13, 2016: Martin I, Pope and Martyr)

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“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger or thirst...” (JN 6: 35 – 40)

In a letter to the Duc de Bellegarde (dated August 24, 1613), Francis de Sales wrote:

“As your heart continues receiving its Savior more often (in Communion) it would also continue being more perfectly converted to him. During the twenty-five years that I have been serving souls, experience has given me an insight into the all-powerful virtue of the Divine Sacrament for confirming hearts in the way of goodness, preserving them from evil, consoling them, and in a word, making them god-like in this world, provided that they are moved by a right faith, by purity and devotion.” (Selected Letters, Stopp, Chapter 29, pp. 215)

Jesus is the bread of life. Whoever comes to him – whoever receives him – will never hunger. Whoever believes in him – whoever receives him – will never thirst.

With, perhaps, one exception - the hunger and thirst to follow Jesus' example in doing what is good!

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Spirituality Matters 2016: April 14th - April 20th

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(April 7, 2016: John Baptist de la Salle, Priest and Founder)

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“The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things...”

In his Introduction to the devout Life, Francis de Sales observed:

“The Holy Spirit does not dwell in a deceitful and tricky soul. No artifice is as good and desirable as plain dealing. Worldly prudence and carnal artifice belong to the children of this world, but the children of God walk a straight path and their hearts are without guile.”(III, 30, p. 206)

As children of God, what kinds of things will we speak of today?

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(April 14, 2016: Thursday, Third Week of Easter)

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“How can I understand...unless someone instructs me?”

This question raised in the today's selection from the Acts of the Apostles (8: 26 – 40) puts us in touch with Francis de Sales' perspective on two gifts of the Holy Spirit: knowledge and understanding.

The Gift of Knowledge

“This divine gift, however, has little to do with mere human learning. The Spirit's gift of knowledge is essential if we are to make good and effective use of the previous two gifts, if we are to know how to behave towards the God we mean to fear and love. It is about being capable of discerning evil to be avoided and the good to be sought. As the prophet says, offend no more; rather, do what is good. And be at rest always.”

Mere human knowledge only enables us to know the difference between good and evil. The Spirit's gift of knowledge, by contrast, actually enables us to turn away from what is evil and to put our hands to doing what is good.

Francis concludes with this observation: *“There have been saints, to be sure, who were wonderfully wise for all of their ignorance. There have been others, equally as certain, who have been wonderfully ignorant for all of their knowledge.”*

The Gift of Understanding

“Understanding is a special enlightenment that enables us to see and penetrate the beauty and perfection of the mysteries of faith. We may listen to sermons, we may read widely; yet we can remain ignorant of these divine mysteries if we lack the gift of understanding. A simple soul, open in prayer, may gain some insight into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity – not to explain it, but to draw from it some secret aspect that can save – because the Holy Spirit has bestowed the gift of understanding. I always maintain that if anyone loses his soul, it is for want of following such mysteries of the faith, for example: Blessed are the poor in spirit, the kingdom of heaven is theirs; blessed are the patient, they shall inherit the land. Who is awake to the beauty of these principles, however, except those whom the Holy Spirit enlightens?”

There is no substitute for the knowledge that helps us to grow in our understanding of the ways of the Lord. However, we must be careful not to allow knowledge to take the place of understanding. While Francis de Sales recognizes the need to know the difference between good and evil (and, by extension, to actually do good and to actually avoid evil), such knowledge only comes to full flowering when we demonstrate our understanding of God’s ways through our practice of the Beatitudes.

Undertsand?

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(April 15, 2016: Friday, Third Week of Easter)

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“Who are you?”

This question that Saul raises after falling to the ground and hearing a voice speaking to him (Acts 9: 1 – 20) is immortalized in our culture by Pete Townsend (and the group “The Who”) as the name of both an album and a song that debuted in 1978. The song raising this question “Who are you?” is also the theme to the CBS TV hit series CSI: Crime Scene Investigation.

Setting aside the Top 40 charts and the Nielsen Ratings, the question that Saul asks of Jesus is worth being directed at each and every one of us: “Who – are – you?” Francis de Sales answers the question by asking us to consider the following:

- “Consider that a certain number of years ago you were not yet in the world and that your present being was truly nothing.”
- “Consider that God has drawn you out of nothingness to make you what you are now and he has done so solely out of his own goodness.”
- “Consider the nature that God has given to you. It is the highest in this visible world and it capable of eternal life and of being perfectly united to his Divine majesty.”

(IDL, Part I, Chapter 9, pp. 53-54)

Who are you? You are someone created by God. You are someone called to grow in union with God in this world. You are someone destined for eternal life in the next world. Most importantly, you are someone loved by God.

Just today what steps can you take to be the very best version of the person God calls you to be?

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(April 16, 2016: Saturday, Third Week of Easter)

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“How shall I make a return to the Lord?” (Psalm 116)

In the first part of his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales raises the same question in the context of the “First Meditation: On Our Creation.” After considering all of God’s benefits to us, Francis asks: **“What can I ever do to bless your holy name in a worthy manner and to render thanks to your immense mercy?”** (IDL, Part I, Chapter 9, p. 54)

Needless to say, Francis de Sales offers some suggestions as to how we might “make a return to the Lord”. These include:

- **“Give thanks to the Lord. ‘Bless your God, O my soul, and let all my being praise his holy name,’ for his goodness has drawn me out of nothing and his mercy has created me.”**
- **“Offer. O my God, with all my heart I offer you the being you have given me. I dedicate and consecrate it to you.”**
- **“Pray. O God, strengthen me in these affections and resolutions.”**

Today, how can I make a return to the Lord? The answer - by being the person that God has created me to be, and by encouraging others to do the same!!

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(April 17, 2016: Fourth Sunday of Easter)

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“Remain faithful to the grace of God.”

Paul and Barnabas’ advice to the Church in Antioch to “remain faithful to the grace of God” was sound advice for new believers living in the midst of religious ferment. But what did that pious exhortation practically mean for those who heard it and what does it mean for us today who seek to keep these words of scripture “real” in our lives?

It is a call to Salesian humility and gentleness .

Paul reminds all of us that Christians are called to be faithful. Living in truth about who we are reminds us that we are constantly in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness. No one is perfect. We make mistakes and we need to be gentle as we forgive, not excuse, ourselves for them. Perfection allows for no mistakes; faithfulness does not allow us to be conquered by them.

It assumes an ongoing relationship with God in the first place.

How consistent and honest is our prayer life? It’s hard to be faithful to those with whom we never speak.

It demands a new vision.

Remaining faithful to God's grace calls us to see life, its things and its events, as gifts freely given by a loving, empowering God who is for us and who is on our side. Our God is a loving Father, a Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep, not an evil hired hand who does not have the flock's welfare constantly in mind.

It demands flexibility.

Grace, as a free gift, cannot be controlled. It can make demands on us and stretch us and lead us to places we never would have gone by ourselves. DeSales once said: "Blessed are those with flexible hearts, for they shall never be broken." Perhaps we can add: "Blessed too are those of "flexible faithfulness," for the grace of God will always be there.

Paul and Barnabas's ministry described in today's first reading (ACTS 13: 14, 43-52) showed flexibility as they turned from their unsuccessful preaching to the Jews towards the more responsive and Spirit-led Gentiles. They looked for and saw the grace of God at work even in the midst of rejection and abuse. On a more humble, but no less important a scale, we are called to that same "flexible faithfulness" as we "preach" the grace of God by the way we live our lives with precision and passion. Paul and Barnabas were filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Our reward can - and will - be no less.

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(April 18, 2016: Monday, Fourth Week of Easter)

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"Whoever enters through me will be saved..." (JOHN 10: 1- 10)

Jesus wants us to "have life, and to have it to the full" (John 10:10). That's why Jesus cares so much for us. That's why Jesus is the good shepherd who loves us so much that he is willing to lay down his life for us.

And lay down his life is exactly what the Good Shepherd did!

But the people saved by the Good Shepherd are not some exclusive club. There is no "in" group or "out" group when it comes to God's love. Whether of his "fold" or not, Jesus lays down his life for everyone. Note that he says: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd." As we heard in the reading from Acts, salvation was now no longer reserved for Jews alone – Gentiles might follow this Good Shepherd, too.

Truth be told, all of us are members of Jesus' flock. Truth be told, Jesus is for all of us – without exception – our one, Good Shepherd.

Just today, how like that Good Shepherd can we lay down our lives for others?

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(April 19, 2016: Tuesday, Fourth Week of Easter)

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"He rejoiced and encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord in firmness of heart..." (ACTS 11: 19 – 26)

Firmness - or strength - of heart is an invaluable asset in the pursuit of devotion, especially as we deal with the ups and downs of daily life. In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales observed:

“We must try to keep our heart steadily, unshakably equal during the great variety and inequality of daily events. Even though everything turns and changes around us, our hearts must remain unchanging and ever looking, striving and aspiring toward God.”(IDL, Book IV, Chapter 13, p. 256)

A little further along in this chapter, Francis de Sales makes a distinction between tenderness of heart and firmness of heart. He continues:

“Some men think about God’s goodness and our Savior’s passion, feel great tenderness of heart, and are thus aroused to utter sighs, tears and prayers, and acts of thanksgiving so ardently that we say that their hearts have been filled with intense devotion. But when a test comes, we see how different things can get. Just as in the hot summer passing showers send down drops that fall on the earth but do not sink into it and serve only to produce mushrooms, so also these tender tears may fall on a vicious heart but do not penetrate and are therefore completely useless to it.” (IDL, Book IV, Chapter 13, pp. 257-258)

With respect to tenderness of heart and firmness of heart, both have their place in the pursuit of holiness. Tenderness of heart can help us to enjoy the good times; firmness of heart can help us get through the tough times.

What kind of heart might you need to have today?

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(April 20, 2016: Wednesday, Fourth Week of Easter)

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“His commandment is eternal life...” (John 12: 44 – 50)

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Many men keep the commandments in the same way that sick men take medicine – more from fear of dying in damnation than for the joy of living according to our Savior’s will. Just as some people dislike taking medicine – now matter how pleasant it may be – simply because it is called medicine, so there are some souls who hold in horror things commanded simply because they are commanded. By contrast, a loving heart loves the commandments. The more difficult they are the sweeter and more agreeable it finds them since this more perfectly pleases the beloved and gives him greater honor. It pours forth and sings hymns of joy when God teaches it his commandments. The pilgrim who goes on his way joyously singing adds the labor of singing to that of walking, and yet by this increase of labor he actually lessens his weariness and lightens the hardship of the journey. In like manner the devout lover finds such sweetness in the commandments that nothing in this mortal life comforts and refreshes him so much as the precious burden’s of God’s precepts.” (TLG, Book XIII, Chapter 5, pp. 67-68)

Perhaps in this observation from Francis de Sales we can hear the echo of Jesus’ words from Matthew 11: 29 – 30: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart.”

Seeing the commandments of God as strong medicine that cures our sickness can surely weigh us down, but seeing the commandments of God as that which keep us healthy can surely lift us up.

How will you see – and experience – God’s commandments today - as burden or bounty?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: April 21st - April 27th

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(April 21, 2016: Anselm, Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

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“Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.”

In his Conference on *Three Spiritual Laws*, Francis de Sales remarked:

“Never was there a time when people studied as they do now. The great Saints and many others did not study much. They could not have done so, writing as many books as they did, preaching and discharging all the other duties of their office. They had, however, such great confidence in God and in God’s grace that they neither placed their dependence nor their trust in their own skill or labor, so that all the great works which they did were done purely by means of their reliance on God’s grace and almighty power. ‘It is You, O Lord,’ they said, ‘who gives us the work and it for you that we work. It is You who will bless our labors and give us a rich harvest.’ Therefore their books and their sermons bore marvelous fruit. By contrast, we who trust in our fine words, in our eloquent language and in our knowledge labor for that which ends up in smoke. We yield no fruit other than vanity.” (Conference VII, pages 116-117)

It is healthy to remind ourselves that however much good we may manage to accomplish today, it is God ‘who gives us the work.’ It is God who helps us to work. It is God who will bring His work in us to completion. In so doing, what we do gives witness to the goodness of the Lord at work in us and at work among us.

Together, let us sing the goodness of the Lord! But don’t stop there! Together, let us do – and be – the goodness of the Lord in the lives of one another.

Today!

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(April 22, 2016: Friday, Fourth Week of Easter)

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“Do not let your hearts be troubled...” (John 14: 1-6)

We all have a deep-seated fear. Using the image of musical chairs, we fear, when the music stops, there won’t be a chair for us. Jesus promises that this will not happen because he has prepared a place for each and every one of us. This promise from Jesus is a great remedy for our fear of being left out.

From a Salesian perspective, however, the “place” that Jesus promises to create for us is not found exclusively in heaven, but Jesus has also created a unique place, role or niche for each of us here on this earth - a place in which we are called to be sources of his life and his love in the lives of other people.

How will that place – and the people in it – be better for the way you live your life today?

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(April 23, 2016: George, Martyr; Adalbert, Bishop Martyr)

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"The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit..." (Acts 13: 44 – 52)

One of the manifestations of living life in the Spirit is happiness and joy. In a conference to the Sisters of the Visitation, Francis de Sales observed:

"The virtue of cheerfulness requires that we should contribute to holy and temperate joy and to pleasant conversation, which may serve as a consolation and recreation to our neighbor so as to not weary and annoy him with our knit brows and melancholy faces....."(Conference IV, On Cordiality, Book IV, p. 59)

In a letter to St. Jane de Chantal written not long after their first encounter during the Lenten mission that he preached, Francis specifically cites the relationship between joy and religious liberty:

"No loss or lack can sadden one whose heart is perfectly free. I am not saying that it is impossible for such a person to lose his joy, but it will not be for long."....." (Selected Letters, Stopp, p. 71)

In a letter to a young novice who attempted to live the life of a Benedictine sister (but who subsequently left the convent) Francis de Sales underscored the importance of being joyful...or, at least, of trying to be:

"Go on joyfully and with your heart as open and widely trustful as possible; if you cannot always be joyful, at least be brave and confident."....." (Selected Letters, Stopp, p. 46)

It's no accident that we as Christians frequently refer to the term "Easter joy". The power of the Resurrection – and the gifts of the Spirit that flow from it– should go a long way in helping us to be – among other things – joyful! Life being what it is, however, we aren't always joyful people. When we find it tough to be joyful, let's do our best to at least be brave and confident.

And perhaps even find joy in that!

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(April 24, 2016: Fifth Sunday of Easter)

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"God's dwelling is with the human race...God will always be with them."

In Part II, Chapter 2 of his Introduction to the Devout Life, St. Francis de Sales wrote:

"God is in all things and in all places. There is no place or thing in this world where God is not truly present. Just as where birds fly they always encounter the air, so also wherever we go or wherever we are, we find ourselves in God's presence."

This awareness is easier said than done. The truth is that we frequently lose sight of God's abiding, loving, and challenging presence. When we forget this truth we frequently get into trouble:

"Blind men do not see a prince who is present among them, and therefore they do not show him the respect that they do after being told of his presence. However, because they do not actually see him they easily forget his presence, and having again forgotten it, they still more easily forget the respect and reverence owed to him...Likewise, we really know that God is present in all things, but because we do not reflect on that fact, we act as if we did not know this." (Ibid)

When we forget about God's presence we sin. We fail to give God the respect that God deserves. When we forget about God's presence we sin. We fail to give others the respect that they deserve. We might say: "Out of sight, out of sync." When we fail to see God we are more likely to think, feel and act in ways that are out of sync with the person God calls us to be.

The Good News is that remembering God's presence not only provides a potent prescription for avoiding sin but also places tremendous power, possibility and potential at our disposal. Practically speaking, remembering God's presence enables us: to be on our best behavior, to be our best, to live lives of love, to do our part in helping to fashion family, church and community in which every tear is wiped away and to create places and relationships in which there is no more death or mourning, wailing or pain. As one sentence in a sermon suggests, we should, "Give God what is right rather than what is left over."

In short, remembering that God is always with us empowers us to follow St. Francis de Sales' exhortation: "[Wherever we may be, we can and should aspire to live a perfect life.](#)" ([Introduction to the Devout Life](#), Part I, Chapter 3). It empowers us to be who we are, and to be that well, in the service of God and one another.

That's a presence -- and a power -- worth remembering.

Today!

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(April 25, 2016: Mark, Evangelist)

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"Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God..." (1 Peter 5: 5B-14)

Humility is one of the great hallmarks of the Salesian tradition. It is one of two qualities that Jesus used to describe himself. Obviously, then, our attempts to practice humility help us in our efforts to imitate Christ, to "Live + Jesus".

In his [Introduction to the Devout Life](#), Francis de Sales wrote:

["Many men neither wish nor dare to think over and reflect on the particular graces God has shown them because they are afraid that this might arouse vainglory and self-complacency. In so doing they deceive themselves. Since the true means to attain to love of God is consideration of God's benefits, the more we know about them the more we shall love them. Nothing can so effectively humble us before God's mercy as the multitude of his benefits and nothing can so deeply humble us before his justice as our countless offenses against him. Let us consider what he has done for us and what we have done against him, and as we reflect on our sins one by one let us also consider his graces one by one. There is no need to fear that knowledge of his gifts will make us proud if only we remember this truth: none of the good in us comes from ourselves. A lively consideration of graces received makes us humble because knowledge of them begets gratitude for them."](#) ([IDL](#), Part III, Chapter 5, pp. 134-135)

To humble ourselves does include acknowledging our sins, weaknesses and deficiencies. Unfortunately, many of us stop there. True humility challenges us to name not only our sins but also to name God's graces. True humility challenges us to count not only our weaknesses but also to count God's blessings. True humility challenges us to acknowledge not only our littleness but also to acknowledge our greatness.

In the end, the Salesian practice of humility has far less to do with putting ourselves down and a great deal more to do with remembering how God continues to raise us up.

The Almighty has done great things for us; holy is his name and humble is our name!

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(April 26, 2016: Tuesday, Fifth Week of Easter)

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“Peace I leave you; my peace I give you...” (John 14: 27 – 31A)

In a conference to the Visitation Sisters, Francis de Sales observed:

“God wishes our care to be a calm and peaceful one as we proceed faithfully along the road marked out for us. As for the rest, we should rest in God’s fatherly care, trying as far as is possible to keep our soul at peace, for the place of God is in peace and in the peaceful and restful heart. You know that when the lake is very calm – and when the winds do not agitate its waters – on a very serene night the sky with all its stars is so perfectly reflected in the water that looking down into its depths the beauty of the heavens is as clearly visible as if we were looking up on high. So when our soul is perfectly calm, unstirred and untroubled by the winds of superfluous cares, unevenness of spirit and inconstancy it is very capable of reflecting in itself the image of Our Lord.” (Conference III, *On Constancy*, pp. 50-51)

Why were people able to see reflections of the Father in the person of his son, Jesus? Because in the depths of his soul – in his heart of hearts – Jesus managed to rest in his Father’s care. No matter what happened around him on any given day, Jesus was able to keep himself “**calm, unstirred and untroubled**”. If we are having trouble seeing reflections of that same Father in ourselves (or others), perhaps it is because we have some work to do in our own efforts to remain “**calm, unstirred and untroubled**” as we try to “**proceed faithfully along the road marked out for us**”.

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(April 27, 2016: Wednesday, Fifth Week of Easter)

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“Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit...” (John 15: 1-8)

From the perspective of St. Francis de Sales, the fruit that first comes to mind when hearing these words from Jesus is the most important fruit of all - charity or the love of God. Of course, this fruit-of-fruits is manifested in a whole host of ways. In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“The man who possesses charity has his soul clothed with a fair wedding garment which – like that of St. Joseph – is wrought over with all the various virtues. Moreover, it has a perfection which contains the virtue of all perfections and the perfection of all virtues. Hence, ‘charity is patient, is kind. Charity is not envious,’ but generous. ‘It is not pretentious,’ but prudent. ‘It is not puffed up’ with pride but is humble. ‘It is not ambitious’ or disdainful, but amiable and affable. It is not eager to exact ‘what belongs to it’ but is generous and helpful. ‘It is not provoked,’ but peaceful. It ‘thinks no evil’ but is meek. It ‘does not rejoice over wickedness, but rejoices with the truth’ and in the truth. ‘It suffers all things, believes all things’ that are said concerning good to it easily, without stubbornness, contention or distrust. It ‘hopes all’ good things for its neighbor without ever losing hope of procuring his salvation. ‘It endures all things,’ waiting without agitation for what is promised to it...” (TLG, Book XI, Chapter 8, p. 219)

How well do we remain in Jesus? Well, how patient and kind are we? How humble, amiable and affable are we? How meek, generous and humble are we? How truthful and hopeful are we? How patient and long-suffering are we?

Simply put, how much – and what kind of – fruit do we bear?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: April 28th - May 4th

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(April 28, 2016: Peter Chanel, Priest & Martyr; Louis Grignionde Montfort, Priest)

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“I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete...”

This debate outlined in the today’s selection from the Acts of the Apostles puts us in touch with Francis de Sales’ perspective on two gifts of the Holy Spirit: knowledge and understanding.

The Gift of Knowledge

“This divine gift, however, has little to do with mere human learning. The Spirit’s gift of knowledge is essential if we are to make good and effective use of the previous two gifts, if we are to know how to behave towards the God we mean to fear and love. It is about being capable of discerning evil to be avoided and the good to be sought. As the prophet says, offend no more; rather, do what is good. And be at rest always.”

Mere human knowledge only enables us to know the difference between good and evil. Just hearing God’s word doesn’t guarantee the ability to follow it! The Spirit’s gift of knowledge, by contrast, actually enables us to turn away from what is evil and to put our hands to doing what is good.

Francis concludes with this observation.

“There have been saints, to be sure, who were wonderfully wise for all of their ignorance. There have been others, equally as certain, who have been wonderfully ignorant for all of their knowledge.”

Many practicing Jews – considered knowledgeable of the Law and Prophets – rejected Jesus. Many Gentiles – considered by these same Jews to be ignorant of the Law and Prophets – accepted Jesus! This fact was indeed a tough pill for some to swallow.

The Gift of Understanding

“Understanding is a special enlightenment that enables us to see and penetrate the beauty and perfection of the mysteries of faith. We may listen to sermons, we may read widely; yet we can remain ignorant of these divine mysteries if we lack the gift of understanding. A simple soul, open in prayer, may gain some insight into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity – not to explain it, but to draw from it some secret aspect that can save – because the Holy Spirit has bestowed the gift of understanding. I always maintain that if anyone loses his soul, it is for want of following such mysteries of the faith, for example: Blessed are the poor in spirit, the kingdom of heaven is theirs; blessed are the patient, they shall inherit the land. Who is awake to the beauty of these principles, however, except those whom the Holy Spirit enlightens?”

There is no substitute for the knowledge that helps us to grow in our understanding of the ways of the Lord. However, we must be careful not to allow knowledge to take the place of understanding - ultimately, this became the Achilles' heel of many of the Jews of Jesus' day. While Francis de Sales recognizes the need to know the difference between good and evil (and, by extension, to actually do good and to actually avoid evil), such knowledge only comes to full flowering when we demonstrate our understanding of God's ways through our practice of the Beatitudes, that is, by being sources of blessing, happiness and joy in the lives of others!

How does Jesus make our joy complete? The answer - by helping us to be sources – perhaps even signs and wonders - of joy in the lives of one another!

(Based upon a sermon preached by St. Francis de Sales on the feast of Pentecost, date unknown. Translation from Pulpit and Pew: A Study in Salesian Preaching. Vincent Kerns, MSFS.)

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(April 29, 2016: Catherine of Siena, Virgin & Doctor of the Church)

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"It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden..."

"Living Jesus" is not always easy. "Living Jesus" brings with it its share of difficulties and challenges. "Living Jesus" will certainly stretch us and challenge us to be more of the people that God calls us to be.

But one thing that "Living Jesus" is not supposed to be is burdensome.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

"True devotion does us no harm whatsoever, but instead perfects all things. It not only does no injury to one's vocation or occupation, but on the contrary adorns and beautifies it. All kinds of precious stones take on greater luster when dipped into honey, each according to its color. In the same way every vocation becomes more agreeable when united with devotion. Care of one's family is rendered more peaceable, love of husband and wife more sincere, service to one's prince more faithful and every type of employment more pleasant and agreeable." (IDL, Part I, Chapter 3, p. 44)

If your practice of devotion is weighing you down, you must be doing something wrong. If your attempts at "Living Jesus" make your everyday life more complicated, something's not right. Perhaps you're trying too hard. Or, worse yet, maybe you're trying to "Live Jesus" all by yourself.

Take Jesus at his word! Go to him when you find life burdensome. Let him refresh you. Take up his yolk and learn from him, for he is meek and humble of heart. And you'll find rest for your soul, for his yolk is easy, and his burden light.

And if you let him, Jesus might even put a spring in your step today!

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(April 30, 2016: Pius V, Pope)

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"No slave is greater than the master..." (John 15: 18 – 21)

Jesus seems to be saying, in effect, “Don’t even think about trying to be greater than I am.” Put another way, it certainly feels that Jesus is at least reminding us of our place, if not putting us in our place. But as Francis de Sales reminds us in his Treatise on the Love of God, the “place” that Jesus has in mind for us is anything but a put-down.

“You see how God by progressive stages filled with unutterable sweetness leads the soul forward and enables it to leave the Egypt of sin. God leads us from love to love, as from dwelling to dwelling, until He has made us enter into the Promised Land. By this I mean that He brings us into a most holy charity, which to state it succinctly, is a form of friendship and disinterested love, since by charity we love God for his own sake because of his most supremely pleasing goodness. Such friendship is true friendship, since it is reciprocal, for God has eternally loved all those who have loved him, now love him or will love him in time to come. It is manifested and recognized mutually: God cannot be ignorant of the love we have for Him since He himself has given it to us, while we cannot be ignorant of his love for us since He has made it so widely known and we on our part acknowledge that whatever good we possess is the true effect of his good will. In fine, we are in continual communication with Him and He never ceases to speak to our hearts by his inspirations, allurements and sacred movements. He never ceases to do us good or to give us every kind of proof as to his most holy affection. God has openly revealed all his secrets to us as to his closet friends.” (TLG, Book II, Chapter 22, pp. 160 – 161)

The bottom line is that we are already friends of God! Why would we need to be anything greater than that?

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(May 1, 2016: Sixth Sunday of Easter)

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"My peace is my gift to you...but not as the world gives peace."

Jesus makes a distinction in today's Gospel between the peace as the world offers it and the peace that comes from him.

Just what does Jesus mean?

The American Heritage Dictionary on the English Language may provide us with some clues. It defines peace as: 1. the absence of war or hostilities. 2. an agreement or treaty to end hostilities. 3. freedom from quarrels or disagreements; harmonious relations. 4. public security and order. 5. inner contentment; serenity.

The vision of peace that the world offers - appropriately enough - tells us that in order to experience true inner contentment, we must first establish a world in which there is no war, no hostility, no quarrels, no disagreements, no public disorder and no chaos. Tempting as this vision is to pursue, history - the world's and our own - painfully illustrates how truly fleeting and fallacious this promise of peace is...at least, when it comes to this way of going about it.

By contrast, the peace that Jesus promises starts from within. It's about having a sense of integrity. It's about having a sense of purpose. It's about having a sense of meaning. It's about having a sense of mission. Ultimately, it's about having a clear and unambiguous sense of self, a self that is only fully understood and actualized in the context of one's relationship with God, oneself and others.

This is the kind of peace that the world cannot give.

Ironically, it is Jesus' promise of inner peace that offers the greatest hope for world peace. Only when we have first set aside our own personal hostilities, can we truly work for a world free of war. Only when we have first

set aside our own need to be always right, can we strive for a world in which disagreements are not the last word. Only when we have first established some order and direction in our own lives, can we hope to achieve the same on a greater scale. Only when we experience the power and possibility that comes from knowing - and embracing - who we really are in the sight of God, can we become sources of that same power and possibility in the lives of others.

God's peace is not measured by the absence of conflict. God's peace is a function of how dedicated each one of us is to first knowing who we are so that we can see more clearly what the world can be and what steps we must take - together - to make that ideal, however fleeting or fragile, a reality.

Do you want world peace? Then think globally. But, like Jesus, act locally. As the last line of a well-known hymn challenges us, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

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(May 2, 2016: Athanasius, Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

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"I have told you this so that you may not fall away..."

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives his disciples a "heads up". Notwithstanding the imminent arrival of the Paraclete, whom Jesus will send from the Father, there will still be tough – and trying – times ahead for them. Jesus wants them to be prepared so that when the tough – and trying – times come, they won't fall away, that is, so that they don't give up.

In a letter to a "nun" (dated August 20, 1607) Francis de Sales wrote:

"To be a servant of God means to be charitable towards one's neighbors, have an unshakeable determination in the superior part of one's soul to obey the will of God, trusting in God with a very humble humility and simplicity, and to lift oneself up as often as one falls, endure oneself with all one's abjections and quietly put up with others in their imperfections." (Selected Letters, Stopp, p. 140)

Francis de Sales' advice to a "nun" over four hundred years ago is just as relevant today as it was then. Following Jesus – being a servant of God and a temple of the Holy Spirit – will always bring its share of challenges, trials and tribulations. We sometimes fall – we sometimes fail – in the face of these same challenges, trials and tribulations. However, falling down is not the same as falling away, unless, of course, you choose to stay down after falling down.

If you fall – if you fail – in your attempts to "Live + Jesus" just this day, will you stay down or will you get back up?

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(May 3, 2016: Philip and James, Apostles)

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"Hold fast to the word I preached to you..."

In a letter to Andre Fremyot, Archbishop-elect of Bourges, which dealt with the topic of "*Practical Preaching*," St. Francis de Sales wrote the following about the purpose of preaching:

"What end should a person have in view when preaching a sermon? The aim and intention should be to do what our Lord told us when he came into this world to do: 'I have come so that they may have life, and have it

more abundantly.’ The preacher’s object, then, is that sinners who are dead through sin may come to life again with a life that looks toward right doing and that the good – who possess spiritual life within them – may have it yet more abundantly, may become more and more perfect...So the preacher should say to himself when he is in the pulpit: “I have come so that these people here may have life, and have it more abundantly.” (Pulpit and Pew: A Study in Salesian Preaching, pp. 37 – 38)

While not all of us are called to preach from a pulpit, all of us are called to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ through our actions. When we preach to others through the lives we attempt to live, do they find themselves a more – or less – abundant life?

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(May 4, 2016: Wednesday, Sixth Week of Easter)

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“The Spirit of truth will guide you to all truth...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Your language should be restrained, frank, sincere, candid, unaffected and honest. Be on guard against equivocation, ambiguity or dissimulation. While it is not always advisable to say all that is true, it is never permissible to speak against the truth. Therefore, you must become accustomed never to tell a deliberate lie whether to excuse yourself or for some other purpose, remembering always that God is the ‘God of truth.’ If you happen to tell a lie inadvertently, correct it immediately by an explanation or making amends. An honest explanation has more grace and force to excuse us than a lie has...As the Sacred Word tells us, the Holy Spirit does not dwell in a deceitful or tricky soul.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 30, p. 206)

Jesus promises that the “Spirit of truth will guide you to all truth.” How do we know, then, that the Spirit dwells in us? How do other people know that the Spirit dwells in us? We do know when we do our level best to tell the truth, when we do our level best to speak the truth, and when we do our level best to be truthful, truth-filled people.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: May 5th - May 11th

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(May 5, 2016: Thursday, Sixth Week of Easter)

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“He stayed with them and worked...”

This snippet from the Acts of the Apostles reveals something noteworthy about the person of Paul. It seems that when he wasn’t working at preaching in the synagogue he was working to earn his keep – at least, as we are told, until Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia. Put another way, notwithstanding the important work that Paul was doing in Corinth, he did not take Pontus’ and Priscilla’s hospitality for granted. No, he did what he could to support himself, or at least, to make himself less of a burden.

That action on Paul’s part may have provided just as powerful a message – if not more so – than the preaching he did in the synagogue.

This brings to mind the famous saying of St. Francis of Assisi (for whom St. Francis de Sales was named):
“Preach always, and when necessary, use words.”

Just this day how can our attempts to do our part in supporting ourselves help us to appreciate what others do for us? How can our willingness to pitch in be an expression of our gratitude for the generosity of others?

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(The Ascension of the Lord)

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“Why are you standing there looking at the sky?”

Well, the day in question finally arrived. Jesus was taken up into heaven; Jesus returned to the Father. After standing there in silence for what must have seemed like an eternity, one of the eleven eventually broke the quiet by asking the question: “Now what?”

The rest – as they say – is history.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“After Jesus had shown himself for a little while to the disciples, he ascended up to heaven, and at length a cloud surrounded him, took him and hid him from their eyes. Jesus Christ, then, is hidden in heaven in God. Jesus Christ is our love, and our love is the life of the soul. Therefore our ‘life is hidden in God with Christ Jesus, and when Christ who is’ our love and therefore our spiritual life ‘shall reappear’ in the Day of Judgment, we shall also appear ‘with him in glory.’” (TLG, Book VII, Chapter 6, p. 32)

In his Catholic Controversies (p.286) Francis de Sales outlines the activity of the Apostles – especially Peter and Paul – following the Ascension. Simply put, it would appear that once the dust of the Ascension settled, Jesus’ disciples got to work.

This same work continues for us today. Our task in the wake of the Ascension is to make the “hidden” Christ “reappear” through the quality of our love for others.

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(May 6, 2016: Friday, Sixth Week of Easter)

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“You will grieve but your grief will become joy...”

These words spoken by Jesus in today’s Gospel have a familiar ring to those acquainted with the Salesian tradition. They sound like a remarkably simple – but powerful – summarization of St. Francis de Sales’ teaching on what he called “spirit of liberty”:

“The first sign (of this spirit of liberty) is that the heart enjoying this liberty is not at all attached to consolations and accepts afflictions with all the meekness possible to the flesh. I am not saying that the soul does not love consolation and long for it, but without clinging to it. The second sign is that the man enjoying this spirit does not set his heart on spiritual exercises: if illness or some other emergency prevents them he is on no way upset. I am not saying that he does not love them but that he is not attached to them. Thirdly, he does

not lose his joy, because no loss or lack can sadden one whose heart is perfectly free. I am not saying that it is impossible for him to lose his joy, but it will not be for long. (Stopp, Selected Letters, pp. 70 - 71)

What's the bottom line? Into everyone's life a little rain must fall. Into everyone's picnic ants will sometimes intrude. Into everyone's success some setbacks will eventually surface. But for those who are freed by the spirit of liberty, any grief associated with these (and any other hard knocks in life) will – eventually – turn into joy.

Over and over again!

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(May 7, 2016: Saturday, Sixth Week of Easter)

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"Ask and you shall receive..."

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

"If a man prays to God and perceives that he is praying, he is not perfectly attentive to his prayer. He diverts his attention from the God to whom he prays in order to think of the prayer by which he prays...A man in fervent prayer does not know whether he prays or not, for he does not think of the prayer he makes but of God to whom he makes it." (TLG, Book VII, Chapter 6, p. 32)

Today here's a question for you. When you "ask the Father for anything" in Jesus' name, upon what do you focus - that for which you ask or the person from whom you ask it?

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(May 8, 2016: Ascension of the Lord OR Seventh Sunday of Easter)

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(Ascension of the Lord)

"Why are you standing there looking at the sky?"

Well, the day in question finally arrived. Jesus was taken up into heaven and returned to the Father. After standing there in silence for what must have seemed like an eternity, one of the eleven eventually broke the quiet by asking the question: "Now what?"

The rest – as they say – is history.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

"After Jesus had shown himself for a little while to the disciples, he ascended up to heaven, and at length a cloud surrounded him, took him and hid him from their eyes. Jesus Christ, then, is hidden in heaven in God. Jesus Christ is our love, and our love is the life of the soul. Therefore our 'life is hidden in God with Christ Jesus, and when Christ who is' our love and therefore our spiritual life 'shall reappear' in the Day of Judgment, we shall also appear 'with him in glory.'" (TLG, Book VII, Chapter 6, p. 32)

In his Catholic Controversies (p.286) Francis de Sales outlines the activity of the Apostles – especially Peter and Paul – following the Ascension. Simply put, it would appear that once the dust of the Ascension settled, Jesus’ disciples got to work.

This same work continues for us today. Our task in the wake of the Ascension is to make the “hidden” Christ “reappear” through the quality of our love for others.

(Seventh Sunday of Easter)

“I bring with me the recompense I will give to each according to his deeds.”

Today's selection from the Book of Revelation reminds us of the end for which we are created - eternal life with Christ, the Alpha and the Omega. The reading also reminds us that the end for which we are created will include the end of life, as we know it - an end that includes being rewarded, as our conduct on earth deserves.

Notwithstanding God's compassion, God's love, God's forgiveness and God's mercy, each of us will experience this end - and its accompanying judgment - personally.

Still, the Salesian tradition challenges us to recognize the deeper reality of the “end” - or purpose - for which we are created, for which we live: namely, to love. Love not only prepares us for death. Love makes it possible for us to live truly here on earth.

Echoing the words of St. Paul, St. Francis de Sales wrote in his Treatise on the Love of God:

“Love has a perfection which contains the virtue of all perfections and the perfection of all the virtues. Hence, love is patient, is kind, and is not envious, but generous. Love is not pretentious, but prudent. Love is not puffed up with pride but is humble. Love is not ambitious or disdainful, but amiable and affable. Love is not eager to exact all that belongs to it but is generous and helpful. Love is not provoked, but is peaceful. Love thinks no evil but is gentle. Love does not rejoice over wickedness but rejoices with truth. Love suffers all things, believes all things that pertain to all that is good without obstinacy, contention or distrust. Love hopes for all good things for others without ever losing hope of salvation. Love endures all things, awaiting without anxiety the good promised.” (Treatise on the Love of God, Book Eleven, Chapter 8).

Francis concludes: “Love is that fine gold, tried by fire, that contains the price of all things, can do all things, and does all things.”

This kind of life - this kind of love - truly is our end. It is the purpose for which we are born, live and long. It is the purpose for which God will one day call us home to himself forever.

Truly, such a life - such a love - is, indeed, its own reward. Why wait until heaven to experience it? Why not begin today?

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(May 9, 2016: Monday, Seventh Week of Easter)

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“Now you are talking plainly, and not in any figure of speech. Now we realize that you know everything...”

It’s probably safe to say that the Apostles were – as a group – pretty unsophisticated men. Insofar as many of them were tradesmen, they were men who would have put a high premium on keeping things plain and simple. If you had something to say to them, their preference would be that you give it straight to them, without a great

deal of images or elaborations. Put another way, these were men for whom “less” would clearly be “more”. So, we can understand their appreciation in today’s Gospel selection for Jesus’ willingness to simply say what they needed to hear in a manner in which they could hear – and understand – it!

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Your language should be restrained, frank, sincere, candid, unaffected and honest. Be on guard against equivocation, ambiguity or dissimulation. While it is not always advisable to say everything that is true, it is never permissible to speak against the truth. Therefore, you must become accustomed never to tell a deliberate lie whether to excuse yourself or for some other purpose, remembering always that God is the ‘God of truth’...Although we may sometime discreetly and prudently hide and disguise the truth by an equivocal statement, this must never be done except when the matter is important and God’s glory and service clearly require it. In any other such case such tricks are dangerous. As the sacred word tells us, the Holy Spirit does not dwell in a deceitful or slippery soul. No artifice is as good and desirable as plain dealing.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 30, p. 206)

When it comes to preaching – to say nothing of living – the Good News of Jesus Christ, you don’t have to convince other people that you “know everything” in order to be effective. Just give it to people straight, in unembellished and unvarnished words – and ways – that they can understand.

And live!

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(May 10, 2016: Damien de Veuster, Religious, Priest and Missionary)

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“This is eternal life: that they should know you, the only true God and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“‘Life is in the will of God,’ says the Psalmist, not only because our temporal life depends on the divine will but also because our spiritual life consists in its fulfillment, by which God lives and reigns in us and makes us live and subsist in God...Ah, Lord God, we are in this world not to do our own will but that of your goodness, which has placed us here. It was written of you, O Savior of my soul, that you did the will of your eternal Father. Ah, who will give my soul the grace to have no will but the will of God!” (TLG, Book VIII, Chapter 7, p. 73)

To know God is to know God’s will. To love God is to love God’s will. To know and do God’s will is to experience eternal life. Nowhere do we see this love demonstrated more clearly and convincingly than in Jesus’ knowledge, love and obedience to his Father’s will throughout his entire earthly ministry. Note the impact: not only did following the Father’s will not diminish Jesus, but it also empowered Him to be faithful to and effective in his purpose for living - that “we might have life, and have life to the full”. (John 10:10)

If eternal life is found by knowing and loving God – and, by extension, by knowing, loving and living God’s will in our lives – then the eternal life that Jesus offers us is not limited to the next life; it is available here and now in this life.

Let us pray. God, not our will, but your will be done in us, in order that we might know something already on this earth of the eternal life you offer us in the One whom you sent in order that we might know and love you!

Jesus Christ.

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(May 11, 2016: Wednesday, Seventh Week of Easter)

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“Savage wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock...So be vigilant...”

There are a number of variations of a Cherokee parable known as “The Two Wolves.” It goes something like this:

An old Cherokee chief was teaching his grandson about life. The old man said, “A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf is evil. He is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego. The other wolf is good. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too, as these two wolves struggle for supremacy.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?” The old chief sat in silence for a few moments and then simply replied, “The one you feed.”

It is tempting to look for the “savage wolves” about which Jesus warns in other people, especially in the case of those with whom we find ourselves embroiled in misunderstanding, conflict and perhaps even hostility. However, it might be a good idea also to look inside of ourselves for any signs that such “savage wolves” might be living within us. And for what should we be vigilant?

Today, be on the watch for any feeling, thought, opinion or perspective that would pervert the truth of whom we are in our relationship with God, ourselves and one another.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: May 12th - May 18th

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(May 12, 2016: Nereus and Achilleus, Martyrs; Pancras, Martyr)

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“Take courage...”

In a letter to Soeur de Soulfour, Francis de Sales offered this advice:

“Be like a little child who, while it knows that its mother is holding its sleeve, walks boldly and runs all around without being distressed at a stumble or fall; after all, it is as yet unsteady on its legs. In the same way, as long as you realize that God is holding on to you by your will and resolution to serve him go on boldly and do not be upset by your setbacks and falls. Continue on joyfully and with your heart as open and widely trustful as possible. If you cannot always be joyful, at least be brave and confident.” (Stopp, Selected Letters, pp. 45-46)

Be brave; be confident; be courageous.

Being courageous is not about being foolhardy. Being courageous (as we learn from the Italian word, *coraggio*) is about being a person of heart. We all have issues in life; we all have difficulties in life; we all have setbacks in life; we all have heartaches in life. Often times what distinguishes triumph from tragedy in our attempts to deal with life's challenges is whether we end up encouraged or discouraged, that is, whether we manage to maintain our hearts or whether we lose our hearts.

Today, consider the stumbles and falls that you have experienced in life. How have they left you? Encouraged or discouraged? Are you managing to keep your heart or are you losing it?

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(May 13, 2016: Our lady of Fatima)

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“Do you love me...?”

In a sermon preached at the Visitation monastery at Annecy on the seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost in 1618, Francis de Sales observed:

“God wants our love for Him to be a love of choice. He wants us to love Him with a love that chooses Him out from all others. He wants the love which we have for others to be just a faint reflection of the supreme love which we have for Him and to allow His love to reign supreme in our hearts.”

“Some foolish people claim that such a commandment to be impossible in this life. Such people make a big mistake! Our Lord would never have given this commandment without also giving us the power to set about doing it. Other people will say that we cannot love God with our whole heart, soul mind and strength; we must share some of our love with our families and friends. Had our Lord commanded us to love Him as the blessed do in heaven, there might be some point to their objection insofar as the love of the angels and the saints never changes; it is never interrupted. As for us, there are many things vying for our time and attention. Yet for all that, our love for God can be strong and unchanging even though we cannot always be actively showing it.” (Pulpit and Pew, pp. 222 - 223)

Francis de Sales concludes his sermon by asking this question: “How can you be sure that you love God?” He lists three “infallible signs:”

1. “If you love God, you will seek His presence; you will yearn to be close to Him. You will seek Him, not for your own pleasure, but to please Him.”
2. “The love of too many things dissipates our love and lessens its perfection. We are to love other things besides God, but always put Him first. Be forever ready to forego whomever and/or whatever else we may love as God's pleasure may require.”
3. “You are to love one another with a love similar to the love that God has for us – a love that is loyal and unchanging; a love that does not rely on outward appearances; a love that is not impatient of faults and imperfections; a love that is ever ready to lend a helping hand to further our neighbor's good...all the ways in which God, in his goodness, shows his love for us.”

Do you love God? Jesus told Peter how he should show it!

Today, how will you demonstrate your love for God?

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(May 14, 2016: Matthias, Apostle)

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"I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete.

In a sermon entitled "Dedicated Hearts," Francis de Sales stated:

"We might possibly reach a saturation point when it comes to our quest for wealth and honors, but when it comes to loving God, how can we ever say, "I have enough"? No limits can ever be set to our hunger and thirst for Him..." (Pulpit and Pew, p. 223)

In other words, no matter how happy and joyful we might be, our happiness and joy will always be incomplete unless it includes the love of God. And in what will we find complete joy? In the opinion of St. Francis de Sales, it is experienced through our willingness to be what he describes as a "servant of God." He wrote:

"To be a servant of God means to be charitable towards one's neighbors, to have an unshakeable determination in the superior part of your soul to obey the will of God, to trust in God with a very humble humility and simplicity, and to lift oneself up as often as one falls, to endure with all your abjections and to quietly put up with others in their imperfections. (Selected Letters, Stopp, p. 140)

Jesus and the Father share everything in common. Even better, Jesus and the Father share their common wealth with us, including the joy that comes with being a "servant of God".

Just as the Father and the Son share their joy with us, let us share that joy just today - by being servants to one another!

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(May 15, 2016: Pentecost)

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"Each of us hears them speaking in our own tongue about the marvels that God has accomplished."

Despite the fact that they were speaking to many people from many languages and many cultures, the apostles were understood by all of their listeners as they proclaimed the marvels that God had accomplished.

How was this possible?

Enflamed by the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles were speaking the language of the heart. They were speaking with enthusiasm. They were speaking with gratitude. They were speaking with praise and thanksgiving. They were speaking from the core. They were speaking from the soul.

In short, they were speaking the universal language - the language of the heart.

We are most human - we are most divine - when we speak the language of the heart, when we speak the language of love, when we speak and listen from the soul, when we are grounded in the Word-Made-Flesh.

As we know all too well from our own experience, there is more to communication than meets the eye, or for that matter, even the tongue or the ear. Communicating is often a lot easier said than done. We frequently misunderstand one another. We frequently presume to know what others are thinking or feeling. We frequently

use the same words for which there are different meanings. We frequently have different ways of saying the same thing. We frequently hear, but we frequently fail to listen. We are always talking, but talking is not the same as communicating - speaking from one heart to another.

St. Francis de Sales tells us that the Holy Spirit comes to inflame the hearts of believers. When we speak and listen from hearts enflamed with joy, truth and gratitude...

- conflict gives way to understanding
- confusion gives way to clarity
- estrangement gives way to intimacy
- hurt gives way to healing
- frustration gives way to forgiveness
- violence gives way to peace
- and sin gives way to salvation.

Francis de Sales offers this observation:

“Speak always of God as God, that is, reverently and devoutly, not with ostentation or affectation, but with a spirit of meekness, charity, and humility. Distill as much as you can of the delicious honey of devotion and of divine things imperceptibly into the ears of now one person and then of another. Pray to God in your soul that it may please God to make this holy dew sink deep into the hearts of those who hear you. It is wonderful how powerfully a sweet and amiable proposal of good things attracts to hearts of hearers.”

Today, might we need to speak, to listen and to practice the language of love?

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(May 16, 2016: Monday, Seventh Week Ordinary Time)

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“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show his works by a good life in the humility that comes from wisdom.”

In today’s Gospel (MK 9:14-29), Jesus uses his God-given power to drive out a demon. In some scenes He displays his power by healing people. In other stories He displays his power by feeding people. In still more situations He forgives people. The Lord’s power isn’t about Him – His power is about what He does for others.

Insofar as we are created in God’s image and likeness, we share in – among other things – God’s power when we practice virtue in our attempts to reach out to others. In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“We must try hard to be good men and women, devout men and women, pious men and women. We must try hard to achieve this end. Let us try sincerely, humbly and devoutly to acquire those little virtues whose conquest our Savior has set forth as the end of our care and labor. Such are patience, meekness, self-

mortification, humility, obedience, poverty, chastity, tenderness toward our neighbors, bearing with their imperfections, diligence and holy fervor.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 2, p. 127)

How can you robe yourself in God-like power today? The answer - by imitating Jesus’ example of doing for – and being with – others!

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(May 17, 2016: Tuesday, Seventh Week Ordinary Time)

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“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

“Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members? You covet but do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war. You do not possess because you do not ask. You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

Not to put too fine a point on it, but we all know from our own experience that these words from the Letter of James could be applied to us. And where does that leave us?

In a letter addressed to Sister de Chevron-Villette (a novice at the Visitation in Lyons, France), Francis de Sales wrote:

“Selfishness, complacency, false liberty of spirit – these are but some of the things which one cannot well uproot from the human heart. One cannot do more than prevent them from bearing their fruit, which is sin. However, one can moderate their number and frequency by the practice of opposite virtues and chiefly by the love of God. So, we must be patient and amend and curb our bad habits little by little, get the better of our aversions and master our inclinations, moods and passions as they come up. In short, this life is a continual warfare in which no one can claim that they are not attacked. Rest is reserved for heaven where the palm of victory awaits us. In the meantime, on this earth we must fight our battle between fear on the one hand and hope on the other, in the knowledge that hope is always the stronger because He who comes to our help is almighty. So, never give up working constantly towards your amendment and perfection...Deal gently and lovingly with your heart, raising it up when it falls, and longing ardently for its perfection.” (Stopp, Selected Letters, pp. 236-237)

So much of the stuff that we stir up in the lives of other people is rooted in our own unhappiness, unhappiness rooted in what Francis de Sales identified simply as “selfishness”. What is the remedy for our selfishness? Being humble enough to acknowledge our need for God’s grace and practicing virtues which are the opposite of selfishness: growing in the love of God and neighbor.

Fear your faults less – hope in your blessings more...beginning today.

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(May 18, 2016: John I, Pope and Martyr)

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“We saw someone driving out demons in your name.”

As followers of Jesus, we strive to avoid any ways in which we might be against Him. When we are at our best, we, the followers of Jesus do everything in our power to be with Him - to imitate His life by doing good things for others in His name.

Like driving out demons!

Does this sound like a stretch? Not really, if you consider that the kinds of demons that we can help to drive out from those among our family, friends, relatives, neighbors, classmates and co-workers might include:

- Despair
- Despondency
- Discouragement
- Depression

How can we help to drive these – and other - demons out? By loving, supporting, encouraging and championing those who struggle with these – and other - demons. In short, we share in Jesus' healing, freeing and liberating power by being for and with others, just as Jesus is for and with us!

What kind of demons might you be called upon to drive out today – in Jesus' name?

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Spirituality Matters 2015: May 19th - May 25th

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(May 19, 2016: Thursday, Seventh Week Ordinary Time)

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“Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink...I say to you, will surely not lose his reward ...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales offered this observation:

“My friends, we must be prepared to suffer many great persecutions for our Lord, even martyrdom itself. Resolve to give God whatever it is that you hold dearest if it should please God to take it from you - father, mother, brother, sister, husband, wife, son, daughter, your eyes - yes, even your very life itself. Prepare your heart for all such sacrifices as these.”

“However, as long as divine Providence does not send you such great, piercing afflictions and does not, in the end, demand your life of you, at least, be willing to offer God a little of your hair. The point that I am attempting to make is that we must bear courageously the slight injuries, the little inconveniences, the petty persecutions and ordinary losses that are part and parcel of everyday life. By means of such trifles as these, borne with great love and affection, you will completely win God's heart, and make God's heart totally yours. Simple acts of charity, suffering through a headache, toothache or cold, bearing with the ill humor of a husband or wife, the aggravation of a shattered glass, a lost glove, jewelry or handkerchief, an argument or misunderstanding, the inconveniences of going to bed early and/or getting up early to pray or attend Mass, the feelings of self-consciousness that come with doing something good in public - in short, all such little trials as these when accepted and embraced with patience and perseverance are highly pleasing to God's mercy...and to God's generosity.”

“For a single cup of water God has promised to his faithful people an ocean of endless bless. Since such ordinary trials and challenges are a frequent part of every day life, they provide a legion of opportunities for us to store up vast spiritual treasures if only we learn how to profit by them.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 35 pp. 213-214)

Living Jesus – imitating Christ – serving the Lord – is indeed an awesome invitation and vocation. Most days, however, this awesome vocation doesn’t require that we do great things, but, by contrast, it usually asks that we do small things with great love.

In the eyes of God, little things mean a lot. In fact, in most cases, little things can mean everything!

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(May 20, 2016: Bernadine of Siena)

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“Do not complain, brothers and sisters...”

In a letter address to Madame de Peyzieu, Francis de Sales made the following observation:

“We must fight resolutely against hating and spurning our neighbor, being careful to abstain from an imperfection we are not aware of but which is very harmful and of which few people are free: I mean that when we happen to censure our neighbor or complain about him (which ought to be a rare thing), we never leave off but begin the story over and over again, repeating our complaints and grievances endlessly. This is a sign of touchiness and of a heart that is not really healthy as yet. Strong and staunch hearts only complain when there is really something important to complain about, and even then they do not harbor resentment, nor do they succumb to fuss and agitation.” (Stopp, Selected Letters, pp. 206-207)

On any given day, how often do you complain? What do your complaints tell you about the health of your heart?

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(May 21, 2016: Christopher Magallanes, Priest and Companions - Martyrs)

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“Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing a song of praise...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God,” Francis de Sales wrote:

“Indifference must be practiced in things that concern natural life, such as health, sickness, beauty, ugliness, weakness and strength, in things that concern civil life, such as honors, rank and wealth, in the various aspects of the spiritual life, such as dryness, consolation, relish and aridity, in actions and in sufferings: in sum, in every event of every kind.” (TLG, pp. 107-108)

In the Salesian tradition, being “indifferent” does not mean not caring about what happens to us or others. What being “indifferent” does mean is acknowledging the fact that we have little or no control over what happens to us and others and choosing to live in this truth as people of faith. Francis cites any number of examples of how to practice this “holy indifference”. One such example is found in his Introduction to the Devout Life:

“When any evil happens to you, apply whatever remedies you can and do this in a way agreeable to God, since to do otherwise is to tempt God. Having done this, wait with resignation for the results it may please God to send. If it is God’s will that the remedies overcome the evil, then humbly return God thanks. If it is God’s will that the evils overcome the remedies, then bless God with patience.” (IDL, Stopp, p. 129)

In good times, in tough times and in all the other times in between - be it through prayer, song, laughter or lament - in all things give praise and thanks to God.

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(May 22, 2016: Holy Trinity)

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The Wisdom of God proclaims: "I was beside God as his craftsman; I was God's delight day by day."

God is revealed to us as a creating and loving Father, a nourishing and redeeming Son, and an inspiring and challenging Spirit. It is in the image and likeness of the Trinity that we are created; it is in the image and likeness of the Trinity that we are called to live with one another on this earth; it is in the image and likeness of the Trinity that we are destined for the glory of heaven.

Trinity speaks of creative fullness; Trinity speaks of healing abundance; Trinity speaks of inspiring generosity.

The Holy Spirit, the Wisdom of God, is the source of the gifts that we need to experience and embody this Triune God in our daily lives. St. Francis de Sales wrote in his Treatise on the Love of God:

“We need **temperance** to restrain the rebellious inclinations of sensuality; **justice**, to do what is right in relation to God, our neighbor and ourselves; **fortitude**, in order that we might remain faithful in doing what is good and in avoiding what is evil; **prudence**, to discover the most proper ways for us to pursue what is good and to practice virtue; **knowledge**, that we might know the true good to which we must aspire, as well as true evil, that we must reject; **understanding**, to penetrate well into the first and chief foundations or principles of the beauty and excellence of virtue, and; at the very end, **wisdom**, to contemplate the divine nature, the first source of all that is good.” (TLG, Book 11, Chapter 15)

Do these virtues sound familiar? They should be! We know them as the "seven gifts" of the Holy Spirit.

The love that comes from this triune God, a love that is part and parcel of who we are, contains all of these gifts. Francis de Sales described this love as “a splendid lily that has six petals whiter than snow, and in its center are the beautiful little golden hammers of wisdom that drive into our hearts the loving taste and flavor of the goodness of the Father, our Creator, the mercy of the Son, our Redeemer, and the sweetness of the Holy Spirit, our Sanctifier.” (*Ibid*)

As mysterious as the Trinity may be, two things are crystal clear: (1) we are called to embody God's creative fullness, God's healing abundance, and God's inspiring generosity, and (2) we have been given the gifts to make that call a reality.

Today, we pray: Triune God – Father, Son, Spirit – help us to clearly - and convincingly - reflect your image in our own minds, hearts, attitudes and actions. Give us the grace to be your delight day by day in the lives of one another.

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(May 23, 2016: Monday, Eighth Week Ordinary Time)

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“Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

In today’s Gospel, (MK 10:17-27) Jesus cites generosity as a precursor to following Him.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Frequently give up some of your property by giving it with a generous heart to the poor. To give away what we have is to impoverish ourselves in proportion as we give, and the more we give the poorer we become. It is true that God will repay us not only in the next world but even in this world. Nothing makes us so prosperous in this world as to give alms, but until such time as God shall restore it to us we remain the poorer in the amount we have given. Oh, how holy and how rich is the poverty brought on by giving alms.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 15, p. 165)

Note the qualifier – “some” of your property. Preparing to follow Jesus – to say nothing of continuing of follow Jesus – is not about being totally generous at one moment of your life. Rather, imitating Jesus is about being consistently generous over the course of a lifetime.

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(May 24, 2016: Tuesday, Eighth Week Ordinary Time)

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“Be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct...”

Some things are worth repeating, especially questions like, “What does it mean to be holy?” As Francis de sales might phrase it, “What does it mean to be devout?”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Inasmuch as divine love adorns the soul, it is called grace, which makes us pleasing to his Divine Majesty. Inasmuch as it strengthens us to do good, it is called charity. When it has reached a degree of perfection at which it not only makes us do good but to do what is good carefully, frequently and promptly, is it called devotion.” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 1, p. 40)

Want to be holy today? Simply do what is right and good carefully, frequently and promptly.

No more – but no less.

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(May 25, 2016: Wednesday, Eighth Week Ordinary Time)

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“Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant...”

What does it mean to be a servant? More specifically, what does it mean to be a servant of God?

“To be a servant of God means to be charitable toward our neighbor, to have an unshakeable determination to pursue the will of God, to trust in God with a very humble humility and simplicity and to lift ourselves up as

often as we fall, enduring oneself in the midst of one's imperfections and quietly putting up with the imperfections of others." (Stopp, *Selected Letters*, p. 140)

Wish to be a servant of God? Want to be a servant to others? Begin by living with your own imperfections, to say nothing of living with the imperfections of others.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: May 26th - June 1st

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(May 26, 2016: Philip Neri, Priest)

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"Master, I want to see..."

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales offered wrote:

"God is in all things and places. There is no place or thing in this world in which God is not truly present. Everyone knows this truth in theory, but not everyone puts this knowledge to good effect. Blind men do not see a prince who is present among them, and therefore do not show him the respect they do after being informed of his presence. However, because they do not actually see the prince they easily forget he is there, and once they forget this fact, they still more easily lose the respect and reverence owed to him. Unfortunately, we frequently lose sight of the God who is with us. Although faith assures us of his presence, we forget about him and behave as if God were a long way off because we do not see him with our eyes. While we may tell ourselves and others that God is present in all things, we often act as if this were not true because we fail to remind ourselves of God's presence." (IDL, Part II, Chapter 2, p.84)

Despite the fact that the blind man in today's Gospel could not actually see Jesus, it is crystal clear that he showed Jesus respect and reverence. What is the moral of the story? Even when we lose sight of how Jesus acts in our lives and in the eyes of other people day in and day out, it is always within our power to show him the respect and reverence by acting as Jesus did in showing respect and reverence for others.

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(May 27, 2016: Augustine of Canterbury, Bishop)

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"Be hospitable to one another without complaining..."

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales offered wrote:

"There is no one who at some time or another has not felt the lack and the want of some convenience. It sometimes happens that we are visited by a guest whom we would and should entertain very well, but at the time lack the means to do so. At other times, our best clothes are in one place and we need them to be in another place where we must appear publicly. Again, sometimes the wines in our cellars ferment and turn sour, so that only bad or green wines are left. At another time we are on a trip and have to stay in some hovel where everything is lacking and we have neither bed, room, table nor service. In fine, it is often very easy to lack things, no matter how rich we may be." (IDL, Part III, Chapter 15, pp. 166 - 167)

Francis seems to be saying: the next time you're tempted to complain about being hospitable, remember an occasion in which someone went out of their way to be hospitable to you. Besides, complaining while being hospitable defeats the purpose for being hospitable in the first place.

Doesn't it?

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(May 28, 2016: Saturday, Eighth Week Ordinary Time)

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"Wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

In his Treatise on the Love of God," Francis de Sales wrote:

"By a wondrous infusion of his grace into our hearts, God makes our works become his and yet at the same time they remain our own, since we are members of a head of which he is the Spirit and since we are engrafted on a tree of which God is the divine sap. Because God thus acts in our works and we co-operate in God's action, God leaves us for our part all the merit and profit of our services and good works, while we leave God all the honor and all the praise for them, for we acknowledge that the beginning the progress and the end of whatever good we accomplish depends on God's mercy, finishing what God began. Oh God, how merciful is your goodness to us in bestowing on us such a gift!" (TLG, Bk 11, Ch 6, p. 212)

In our day, the mercy of God is not something for which to wait – it is available here and now, ready for us to use it in our attempts just this day to perform good works for others.

What are we waiting for?

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(May 29, 2016: Body and Blood of Christ)

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"Give them food yourselves."

The disciples seemed to be a practical group of men, perhaps like most ministers of the Church, including most of us, for that matter. If today's account in the Gospel had occurred in a contemporary parish, they may have worded their question along these lines: "Did anyone requisition a room for all these people to meet and eat? What about the health department or fire marshal? Who's going to pay for this? Who's running this show? Are we going to get sued?"

Fortunately for us, Jesus wasn't concerned about any of these details. In fact, in the face of the daunting task of feeding at least 5,000 men (not counting women and children), Jesus essentially said, "Do it yourselves."

His only organizational instruction was to have the people sit down in groups of fifty. And to their credit, they did as they were told. And there is the rub, that is, they did as they were told without any evidence of a solution that made sense. Obviously, their faith in Jesus prevailed. They believed that if Jesus recognized a need, Jesus would – and could – do whatever it takes to meet that need.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Your chief aim in Holy Communion should be to advance, strengthen and comfort yourself in the love of God, receiving for love’s sake what love alone can give. There is nothing in which the love of Christ is set forth more tenderly or more touchingly than in the Sacrament by which He, so to say, annihilates Himself for us and takes upon Himself the form of bread in order to feed us, and unites Himself closely to the bodies and souls of the faithful.”

So, too, with us today, each time when we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, Jesus is with us and within us. But how does knowing that Jesus is truly present to us - and in us - help us when we are faced with situations for which there seem to be no easy solutions? Sometimes all we can do at the time is to try to take stock of what we do have rather than what we don’t have, and decide how to make the best use of what we have, leaving the rest to Jesus.

A biblical commentary on this Gospel passage suggested that the crowd was so moved by love that each shared what he had brought. It is similar to a contemporary challenge, which goes something like this: “If everybody does what they can, we can do anything!”

In this holy Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, we are challenged to reflect on St. Augustine’s maxim, “become what we receive.” We become the Body of Christ. When faced with an overwhelming situation with little or no evidence of resolution or solution in sight, we remember that Christ is present in us and with us, knowing that we are not alone even when we feel that we are alone. So we should have no fear to bring to the table whatever it is we possess when we’re faced with seemingly overwhelming challenges- and leave the rest to God.

Perhaps, if more of us took this message to heart, each of us would be genuinely empowered by the Body and Blood of Christ to do the best we can and to do whatever needs to be done in fulfilling God’s will to feed and nourish one another.

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(May 30, 2016: Monday, Ninth Week of Ordinary Time)

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“What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come, put the tenants to death, and give the vineyard to others.”

We Christians are supposed to be “Alleluia” people. Happy people. Joyful people. Well, we certainly don’t find a lot of happy people in today’s Gospel parable from Mark (12: 1-12) – in the end, especially the owner of the vineyard.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Just as seaman who set sail with a favorable wind and in fair weather never forget the cables, anchors and other things needed in time of danger and storm, in like manner even though God’s servants enjoy the sweet repose of holy love, we must never be without the fear of divine judgments so that we may use it in the storms and assaults of temptations. Again, just as the apple’s skin – a thing in itself held in small esteem – still helps greatly to preserve the apple it covers, so fear, which in itself is of little value in comparison with love, is yet very useful for preserving love during the dangers of this mortal life...Although fear is very necessary in this mortal life, it is unworthy of having any place in eternal life, where there will be certainty without fear, peace without distrust and rest without care. Yet, such services as fear may provide on behalf of love will be rewarded in heaven.” (TLG, Book XI, Chapter 17, pp. 245-246)

In a perfect world all we would need to live – to do what is right and to avoid what is evil – is the love of God. The tenants in today’s Gospel parable might have fared a lot better if they had had even the slightest respect or fear for the representatives of the owner of the vineyard or for the vineyard owner himself. Their total lack of fear emboldened them to the point where they murdered the owner’s son – with disastrous consequences to themselves.

As we know all-too-well from our own lived experience, this world isn’t perfect and neither are we. Try as we might to do everything out of love, there are occasions in which it doesn’t hurt to have a little fear – and on occasion, maybe even a little bit of trembling, for good measure - to provide our love with a little “back-up” or reinforcement when times get difficult or temptations become challenging.

What’s the bottom line? When it comes to living a God-like life, a little fear goes a long way. But in the end it is love – and only love – that will take us the rest of the way.

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(May 31, 2016: Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

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“Anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal...”

No sooner had Mary received the announcement from the Angel Gabriel that she would be the mother of the Messiah than she “set out and traveled to the hill country in haste” where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. (Recall that in the context of the Annunciation, Mary had learned that her cousin was pregnant.) As if Mary did not already have enough on her plate, she dropped whatever she was doing in order to offer assistance to Elizabeth for “about three months”. Mary didn’t wait for the request; Mary anticipated the need.

One of the hallmarks of the Salesian tradition is this notion of “anticipating the need of our neighbor”. This quality invites us to ‘be on the lookout’ for opportunities to do good for others. Simple things: like holding open a door for another, offering to help carry someone’s groceries, assisting someone who may have dropped something on the floor, checking in on someone who’s under the weather, being the first to greet someone or to call someone by name and asking how someone is doing today. These are ordinary, everyday ways of honoring others by simply acknowledging their presence, by recognizing that they exist.

Here is where Paul’s admonition in his Letter to the Romans comes into play. Insofar as each day is filled with countless opportunities to honor people by anticipating their needs – by “looking out” for their interests – such efforts could understandably become wearisome over time. In the Salesian tradition, we need to approach each new day as yet another-God given gift - the invitation to offer to do good things for others rather than waiting for others to ask us to do good things for them.

Mary embodied the virtue of anticipating the need of another in her decision to offer her cousin Elizabeth assistance without waiting to be asked. In so honoring her cousin she brought honor to herself.

Today, how could we honor Mary by following her example through our willingness to anticipate the needs of one another?

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(June 1, 2016: Justin, Martyr)

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“To you, O Lord, I lift my eyes.”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Consider the nobility and excellence of your soul. It is endowed with understanding, which knows not only this visible world but also that there are angels and a paradise. It knows that there is a God, most sovereign, most good and most ineffable. It knows that there is an eternity and knows also what manner is best designed for living well in this visible world so that our soul may be joined with the angels in paradise and enjoy God for all eternity. Moreover, your soul has a most noble will and that same will is capable of loving God...”

“O beauteous soul!’ you must acclaim, ‘Since you can know and desire God, why would you beguile yourself with any lesser thing? Since you can advance your claim to eternity, why should you beguile yourself with passing things? One of the prodigal son’s regrets was that he might have lived in plenty at his father’s table whereas he had eaten among the beasts. O my soul, you are made for God! Woe to you if you are satisfied with anything less than God! Raise your soul aloft on this consideration. Remind it that it is eternal and worthy of eternity. Fill it with courage for this project.”

(IDL, Pat V, Chapter 10, pp. 282-283)

In the midst of all the things that you may experience and the people that you may encounter today, remember to lift up and to raise your eyes to God looking at yourself as worthy of respect and reverence. For that matter, remember to lift up and raise up your eyes to God by looking at others as equally worthy of that same respect and reverence.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: June 2nd - June 8th

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(June 2, 2016: Thursday, Ninth Week of Ordinary Time)

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“You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Imagine yourself to be standing in an open field with your guardian angel and that you see the devil seated high upon a huge throne, attended by many infernal spirits and surrounded by a great throng of worldly people who, with uncovered heads, hail him as their lord and pay him homage, some by one sin and some by another. Note the faces of all the unfortunate courtiers of that abominable king. See how some of them are furious with hatred, envy and anger, while others are consumed with care and burdened down by worries as they think and strive to heap up wealth. See how others are bent upon their own vain pursuits that bring empty and unsatisfying pleasure and how others are defiled, ruined and putrefied by their brutish lusts. See how they are without rest, order and decency. See how they despise one another and make only a false show of love. In a word, you see a kingdom lying in ruins and tyrannized over by this accursed king.”

“In the other direction you see Jesus Christ crucified. With heartfelt love he prays for those poor tormented people so that they may be set free from such tyranny, and he calls them to himself. Around him you see a great throng of devout souls together with their guardian angels. Contemplation the beauty of this devout

kingdom, How beautiful it is to see this throng of virgins – both men and women – all whiter than lilies, and this gathering of widows filled with sacred mortification and humility! See the crowded ranks of the married who live so calmly together in mutual respect, which cannot be attained without great charity. See how these devout souls wed care of the exterior house to that of the interior, that is, the love of their earthly spouse with that of the heavenly Spouse. Consider them all as a group and see how all of them in a holy, sweet and lovely manner attend our Lord and how they long to place Him in the center of their hearts. They are joyful, but with a gracious, loving and well-ordered joy. They love one another with a most pure and sacred love. Among these devout people those who suffer afflictions are not over-concerned about their sufferings and never lose courage. To conclude, look upon the eyes of the Savior who comforts them and see how all of them together aspire to Him.” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 18, pp. 69-70)

Conversely, at any given moment in our lives we are, indeed, not far from the kingdom of God. However, it is also true that at any given moment in our lives we are likewise not far from the kingdom of Satan.

Today, which kingdom will you choose during the course of these moments?

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(June 3, 2016: Sacred Heart of Jesus)

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“The love of God has been poured into our hearts...”

In a letter (undated) to the Sisters of the Visitation, Jane de Chantal wrote:

“You are, I hope, always striving more earnestly to rid yourself of all that is displeasing to your sovereign spouse and to acquire those virtues which please him. Oh, my dearest sisters, how deeply is this wish engraved in my heart! Show a childlike trust and gentleness toward one another...So courage, dear ones. May all of you together – and each one in particular – work at this and never grow slack. May you all live in harmony with one heart and mind in God...If you imitate Him in all your little trials and make His divine will rule in you, He will fill it with every blessing...I urge you to this once again, for the love of our Savior and by his Precious blood, and with the deep affection of my heart which is all yours in Jesus. (Wright, Heart Speaks to Heart: The Salesian Tradition, p. 95)

God gives us the courage to accept St. Jane’s exhortation and make it our own! God gives us the grace we need to live in harmony with one heart and mind! God gives us the patience to acquire the virtues that please God and serve others.

Today, may God fill us with every blessing - and help us to be a blessing to each other – as He did so clearly through the Sacred Heart of his Son! Just as the love of God has been poured into our hearts through Christ, so may we be willing to share that same love with the hearts of one another.

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(June 4, 2016: Immaculate Heart of Blessed Virgin Mary)

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“Why have you done this to us?”

In a conference given to the Sisters of the Visitation on “Constancy” (July 1620), Francis de Sales remarked:

“We are far too tender about our bodies, but incomparably more so when it comes to our souls, and in both cases this tenderness is very contrary to perfection. One might say, ‘Alas! I am not faithful to Our Lord, and

therefore I have no consolation in prayer.’ This is a pity, to be sure. Another may say, ‘I am so often dry and cold that I think I cannot be in God’s favor, since He is so full of consolation.’ Of course, the problem is that this presumes that God always gives nothing but consolations to His friends. But this is not true! Were there ever creatures more worthy of being loved – or more actually loved by God – than Our Lady and St. Joseph and yet did they always enjoy consolations? ...” (Conferences, Conference III, pp. 48 – 49)

Today’s selection from the Gospel of Luke is a perfect example of the point that Francis de Sales is making - pursuing a God-centered life brings no guarantee of a smooth or trouble-free life. Imagine the initial shock that Mary and Joseph experienced when they realized that their son was missing! Like any decent parents, they didn’t simply shrug their shoulders and say, “God will provide.’ No, they went looking for him and finally found him, albeit three days later! Is it any wonder that Mary was exasperated when she first spoke to Jesus - her heart filled with both relief and rebuke? How real! How authentic! How human!

Francis de Sales continued:

“When the soul is troubled, tossed and agitated by the tempests of the passion, and when we allow ourselves to be governed by them and not by that reason which makes us akin to God, then we are wholly incapable of reflecting the lovely and beloved image of our crucified Lord, or the variety of His incomparable virtues. We must therefore leave the care of ourselves to the mercy of his divine Providence and yet at the same time do simply and cheerfully all that is in our power to amend and perfect ourselves, always taking careful heed not to allow ourselves to be troubled and disquieted.” (Conferences, Conference III, pp. 48 – 49)

Note how the story ends. Troubled and upset as they may have been, Joseph, Mary and Jesus got over this event as they worked through it. They hashed things out. Mary - being faithful to her vocation - asked the question (note: she included Joseph in her question but it was she who asked it, perhaps being too upset to speak). Jesus - being faithful to his vocation - gave his answer and then the three of them simply got on with their lives - being faithful to their vocation as a family - as they set out for home for the second time, doubtless with a few lessons learned!

Jesus Himself tells us, “In this world you will have trouble but take courage...” (John 16:33) If even Joseph, Mary and Jesus had their share of trouble, should we be surprised when we do? It comes with the territory of being who we are.

Being human!

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(June 5, 2016: Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“The Gospel preached by me is not of human origin.”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“The conformity of our heart with God’s signified will consists in the fact that we will all that God’s goodness signifies to us as his intention, so that we believe according to his teaching, we hope according to his promises, fear according to his warnings and love and live according to his ordinances and decrees. All the protestations we make so often in the Church’s holy ceremonies tend to this end. For this reason we remain standing while the Gospel lessons are read to show that we are ready to obey the holy signification of God’s will contained in the Gospel. For this reason we kiss the book at the place where the Gospel is, to show that we adore the holy word that declares God’s will...Because of this in the early councils they set up a throne in the midst of the assembled bishops and placed on it the book of the Holy Gospels to represent the person of the Savior, king,

teacher, spirit and unique heart both of councils and of the entire Church. So greatly did they honor the signification of God's will as expressed in that divine book! Indeed, the great mirror of the pastoral order, St. Charles Borromeo, archbishop of Milan, never studied Holy Scripture except on his knees and with his head uncovered to testify to the respect which with we must hear and read God's signified will." (TLG, Book VIII, Chapter 3, pp. 63-64)

The Gospel preached is indeed of divine origin, but what a privilege it is for us human beings to be entrusted by God with the work of sharing the divinely-inspired Good News with others, even in our own day and in our own ways!

Today, we should strive to do our level best to show God's Word the respect that it – and He – deserve not only by how we hear it and preach it, but especially by how we try to live it.

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(June 6, 2016: Monday, Tenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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"Blessed are..."

How might we experience blessing in our lives? How might we be blessing in the lives of others? Some strategies for achieving both might include

- not clinging to what we have but share it willingly with others
- being willing to experience the kind of sorrow that leads to compassionate action
- being humble and gentle enough to see everything as gift
- making righteousness and justice a priority in our lives
- a willingness to be generous, especially by acts of forgiveness and reconciliation
- having hearts that are guileless, open, honest and frank
- trying to bring others together rather than drive them apart
- being able to do what is right in the face of misunderstanding, resistance and even hostility

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

"To sum up, most holy dilection is a virtue, a gift, a fruit and a beatitude. As a virtue, it makes us obedient to the exterior inspirations that God give us by his commandments and counsels, in fulfillment of which we practice all the virtues. Hence, love is the virtue of all virtues. As gift, dilection makes us docile and amenable to God's interior inspirations. These are God's secret commandments and counsels as it were, and in their fulfillment the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are employed. Hence dilection is the gift of gifts. As a fruit in our practice of the devout life, it gives us great relish and pleasure, which are experienced in the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is the fruit of fruits. As beatitude, it enables us to accept the fronts, calumny, reviling and insults the world heaps upon us as the greatest favors and a unique honor. It also leads us to forsake, renounce, and reject all other glory except that which comes from the Beloved Crucified." (TLG, Book XI, Chapter 19, pp. 252-253)

In short, how do we become Beatitudes of God? The answer - by our attempts each and every day to be a source of blessing in the lives of others.

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(June 7, 2016: Tuesday, Tenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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"The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry..."

The story from today's reading from the Book of Kings illustrates the reward that awaits those who trust in God's care for them. In a conference ("On Hope") to the Sisters of the Visitation, Francis de Sales observed:

"No one ever trusts in God without reaping the fruits of his confidence. Consider, I beseech you, what Our Lord and Master said to His Apostles in order to establish in them this holy and loving confidence: I sent you forth through the world without scrip, money or any provision, either for your food or for your clothing, and did you want for anything? They answered: Nothing. Go, He then said to them, and take no thought what you shall eat or what you shall drink, or wherewithal you shall be clothed...for on each occasion your heavenly Father will furnish you with all that is necessary for you...Do you think that He who takes care to provide food for the birds of the air and the beats of the field will ever forget to provide all that is necessary for the one who trusts wholly in His Providence?"(Conference VI, pp. 89-90)

Francis de Sales once counseled: "It is far better for us to want what we have rather than to have what we want." Do we trust that God will always give us what we need but not necessarily always give us what we'd like? If it be God's will, are we willing to content ourselves with the one thing that will never go empty or run dry?

God's fidelity to – and love for – us!

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(June 8, 2013: Wednesday, Tenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets..."

Throughout the Gospels Jesus was repeatedly criticized by the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes for not "doing it by the book". That is, he was accused of abolishing the Law and the prophets by not living by the letter of the Law. In today's Gospel Jesus responds to that charge by saying not only does He have no intention of abolishing the Law, but also he plans to go one step further – to fulfill the Law.

And how does Jesus fulfill the Law and the Prophets? He does so by being himself, that is, by performing the works of God in accordance with the will of God, and not by the whims of man – a life described by St. Paul as a life lived in "the Spirit."

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

"The Holy Spirit dwells in us if we are living members of Jesus Christ, who said to his disciples, 'He who abides in me, and I in him bears much fruit.' This is because one who abides in him partakes of his divine Spirit, who is the midst of a person's heart as a living fountain springs up and flashes its waters into everlasting life...Thus, like a little grain of mustard seed, our works are in now ay comparable in greatness to the tree of glory they produce. Still they have the vigor and virtue to produce it because they proceed from the Holy Spirit. By a wondrous infusion of his grace into our hearts he makes our works become his and yet at the same

time they remain our own, since we are members of a head of which he is the Spirit...” (TLG, Book XI, Chapter 7, pp. 211-212)

So, it turns out that the reason that Jesus did not abolish the Law – even the smallest parts of it – is that he embodied the Law, that is, the Law of the Spirit which supersedes (“fulfills”) the letter of the Law. While we, the followers of Jesus, may need to know how to do it “by the book,” the life of Jesus clearly suggests that there is something much more important than the letter of the law – the law of the Spirit, which leads to life.

Today, how can we do our part in fulfilling Jesus’ law of love through our love for one another?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: June 9th - June 15th

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(June 9, 2016: Thursday, Tenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees you will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven.” ...”

In today’s Gospel Jesus raises the bar when it comes to considering just what it takes in order to “enter into the Kingdom of God”. Jesus calls his disciples to a higher love! When it comes to judgment, it’s no longer enough for them to say, “Well, we never killed anybody.” Now, they must also be able to say, “We did not grow angry with somebody else; we did not hold another person in contempt; we didn’t hold a grudge against anybody!”

In other words, Jesus calls his disciples to live a higher love!

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales describes what this higher love – “devotion” – looks like:

“Inasmuch as divine love adorns the soul, it is called grace, which makes us pleasing to his Divine Majesty. Inasmuch as it strengthens us to do good, it is called charity. When it has reached a degree of perfection at which it not only makes us do what is good but also enables us to do what is good carefully, frequently and promptly, it is called devotion. Ostriches never fly; hens fly in a clumsy fashion near the ground and only once in a while, while eagles, doves and swallows fly aloft, swiftly and frequently. In like manner sinners in no way fly up towards God, but make their way here upon the earth and for the earth. Good people who have not yet attained devotion fly toward God by their good works but do so infrequently, slowly and awkwardly. Devout souls ascend to Him more frequently, promptly and with lofty heights.” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 1, p. 40)

Today, how might we rise to Jesus’ challenge to live a higher love? How might our souls “ascend to Him more frequently promptly and with lofty heights” with our feet planted firmly on this earth?

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(June 10, 2016: Friday of the Tenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Be stouthearted, and wait for the Lord...” (Responsorial Psalm)

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“God has drawn you out of nothingness to make you what you are now and has done so solely out of his goodness. Consider the nature that God has given you. It is the highest in this visible world. It is capable of eternal life and of being perfectly united to his Divine Majesty.” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 9, p. 95)

We know that we don’t always live up to our God-given goodness. We know we fall short. We know we fall down. We know that we even drag others down with us.

Francis de Sales tells us not to give up. Francis de Sales tells us to keep trying. Francis de Sales tells us to keep moving. Be stouthearted, and wait for the Lord, but in the meantime, try your level best to be the good person that God created you – and redeemed you – to be!

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(June 11, 2016: Saturday of the Tenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you....”

The notion of “reconciliation” to which Jesus speaks at the end of today’s Gospel passage is clearly demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus himself. These values include:

- to cause others to become friendly or peaceable again
- to try to put an end to hostility
- to promote agreement or harmony among others
- to work out/through our differences with others
- to restore a sense of communion, communication or community

Jesus’ reconciliation was all about ending the enmity between God and the human family, as well as - the enmity within the human family. Jesus’ reconciliation was all about making friends out of enemies. Jesus’ reconciliation was all about challenging others to agree upon the things that matter most in life. Jesus’ reconciliation was all about helping people to live in ways consistent with the ways of God. Jesus’ reconciliation was all about creating relationships within which people could experience what it means to be children of God, as well as brothers and sisters in Christ.

At the end of the day, Jesus’ reconciliation has a great deal less to do with words (hence, the warning to avoid “babbling”) and a great deal more to do with actions. Francis de Sales wrote:

“This life is a journey to the happy life to come. We must not be angry with one another along the way, but rather we must march on together as a band of brothers and sisters, companions united in meekness, peace and love. I state absolutely and make no exception, do not be angry at all if that is possible.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 8, pp. 146 – 147)

Notwithstanding the challenges inherently associated with Jesus’ ministry and message, how might we be a source of reconciliation in the name of God in the lives of others?

Today!

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(June 12, 2016: Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“I tell you that her many sins are forgiven because of her great love. Little is forgiven the one whose love is small.”

Today’s Gospel provides us with a powerful example of what one might call a great “teachable moment.” While the “certain” Pharisee no doubt enjoyed specialized expertise regarding the law and the prophets, it is “a woman known in town to be a sinner” who certainly seems to have the greater grasp of God’s mercy and generosity as it is embodied in the person of Jesus. While the Pharisee no doubt possesses great knowledge, it is that woman, who demonstrates that – notwithstanding her sins and weaknesses – she possesses even greater love.

Francis de Sales’ insights on the relationship among love, repentance and forgiveness are worth considering here.

“Theotimus, along with the tribulation and sorrow found in a lively repentance, God often places deep down at the bottom of a person’s heart the sacred fire of divine love. Then, this love is changed into the water of our many tears, and these, by a second change, are transformed into a second and mightier fire of love. Thus, the renowned repentant lover first loved her Savior; next, this love was changed into tears; then, these tears were changed into a surpassing love. Hence, our Savior said that many sins were forgiven her because she had loved much... This is why perfect penitence has two different effects. In virtue of sorrow and detestation, it separates us from sin and from those to which delectation had attached us. In virtue of the motive of love – whence it has its origin – it reconciles us with God and unites us with God from whom we had separated ourselves by despising him. Hence, at one and the same time, in its quality as repentance, it reclaims us from sin and, in its quality as love, it joins us again to God.” (Treatise, Book II, Chapter 20)

It is interesting that Francis de Sales later relates that this very relationship among repentance, love and forgiveness to today’s selection from Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “This loving repentance is ordinarily put into practice by elevations or turnings of the heart to God... It is not without reason that some have said that prayer justifies. Repentant prayer, or suppliant repentance, which raises the soul to God and reunites it to God’s goodness, undoubtedly obtains pardon in virtue of the holy love that gives it that sacred movement.” (Ibid)

How ironic that the greater sinner – or, at least, the one who more greatly recognizes the reality of one’s sinfulness – is better able to both extend herself in love and receive the love – and forgiveness – of her Savior! What can we learn from her sinfulness, from her repentance, from her hospitality, from her great love, and from her even greater love of her Savior?

Today, we can follow her example in our relationship with others.

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(June 13, 2016: Anthony of Padua, Priest and Doctor of the Church)

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“He refused to let me have his vineyard...”

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines presumptuous as: “Overstepping due bounds (as of [propriety](#) or courtesy); taking liberties.”

The story from today’s selection from the First Book of Kings illustrates how one person’s desire can all-too-quickly become an obsession...with disastrous results. Ahab had his heart set of acquiring Naboth’s vineyard. When Ahab’s offer to purchase Naboth’s property was rebuffed, he couldn’t let it go. Undeterred, Ahab and his wife plotted to have Naboth first discredited and subsequently stoned to death. Once dead, Ahab could easily acquire Naboth’s property. Ahab felt entitled to take liberties with others; he believed that other people’s possessions were his for the taking, notwithstanding the fact that other people weren’t offering their possessions! Having little or no sense of boundaries, this presumptuous behavior – as we shall see tomorrow – ended badly for all concerned.

In his [Introduction to the Devout Life](#), Francis de Sales wrote: “I think you will agree that what I about to describe is both unjust and unreasonable...we want our neighbor to give up his property and take our money for it. Is it not more reasonable that we simply allow him to keep his property while he allows us keep our money?” (Part III, Chapter 36, p. 216) It’s very tempting to tell other people how they should live their lives. It’s all-too-easy to expect other people to make us the center of their universe. In a letter written to Madame Brulart, Francis de Sales counseled: “Don’t sow your desires in someone else’s garden. Just cultivate your own as best you can.”([Letters of Spiritual Direction](#), p. 112)

By all means follow your dreams and pursue your plans...just remember to extend the same courtesy to everyone else.

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(June 14, 2016: Tuesday, Eleventh Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

It’s safe to say that we all have enemies. We all have people in our lives that we do not like. We all have people in our lives whose company we avoid. We all have people in our lives that rub us the wrong way. We all have people in our lives that push our buttons. We all have people in our lives that drive us crazy.

In a conference to the Sisters of the Visitation, Francis de Sales observed:

“Antipathies are certain inclinations which excite in us a certain repugnance toward those about whom we entertain these feelings...If I feel a repugnance to conversing with a person whom I know to be most excellent – and from whom I might learn much that would do me good – I must not succumb to the antipathy which prompts me to avoid his company. On the contrary, I must discipline myself to listen to the voice of reason telling me rather to seek his company or at least, if I am already in it, to remain there in quiet, peaceful mind...People who are of a harsh, severe disposition will dislike those who are gentle and mild. They will regard such gentleness as extreme weakness, though indeed it is a quality most universally beloved. What remedy is there for these antipathies, since no one, however perfect, can be exempt from them? The only remedy for this evil – as indeed for all other kinds of temptation – is simply to turn away from it and think no more about it...We should never try to justify our reasons for our antipathies, let alone wishing to nourish them. If you have simply a natural, instinctive dislike for anyone, I beseech you to pay no attention to it; turn away your thoughts from it and so trick your mind. When, however, you find these antipathies going too far you must fight against them and overcome them, for reason will never permit us to foster antipathies and evil inclinations for fear of offending God.” ([Conference XVI](#), pp. 298 - 301)

Francis knows the human heart very well. He acknowledges that “[this instinctive tendency to love some more than others is natural.](#)” (*Ibid*) Likes and dislikes are part-and-parcel of life. That said, Jesus commands us to love our enemies. Jesus commands us to love those whom we dislike. Jesus commands us to love those who get on our nerves.

Like it or not!

And beginning today!

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(June 15, 2013: Wednesday, Eleventh Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Take care not to perform righteous deeds...that others might see them.”

In a letter to Madame de la Flechere, Francis de Sales observed:

[“Humility is the virtue of virtues, but a humility that is generous and peaceable. Preserve a spirit of holy joy which – modestly spreading over your words and actions – gives consolation to the good people who see you, that thus they may glorify God, which is your only aim.”](#) ([Living Jesus](#), p. 150)

Jesus calls us to “perform righteous deeds.” He calls us to live a life of virtue. That said, Jesus cautions us against doing so to win the applause, praise or adulation of others.

Let’s try our level best this day to do the right thing for others. Let’s try our level best to do it for the right reason: to the praise and glory of God!

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Spirituality Matters 2016: June 16th - June 22nd

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(June 16, 2016: Thursday, Eleventh Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Thy will be done...”

In a sermon on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Francis de Sales preached:

[“People who, like Martha, are desirous and anxious to do something for Our Lord believe they are very devout and believe that this eagerness is a virtue. However, this is no so, as He Himself would have us understand. Only one thing is required, that is, to have God and possess Him. If I seek only Him, what does it matter to me if I have to do one thing or another? If I desire only His will, what will it matter to me if I have to do one thing or another? If I desire only His will, what will it matter to me whether I am sent to Spain or to Ireland? If I seek only His cross, why should I be troubled if I am sent to the Indies, or to old countries or to new countries, since I am certain that I shall find it everywhere?”](#) ([Living Jesus](#) p. 436)

These are not mere pious platitudes coming from the mouth of the Gentleman Saint. His life is filled with illustrations of how Francis de Sales practiced what he preached. In reflecting upon an offer he received to become a coadjutor to Cardinal de Retz in Paris, he wrote to Madame Angelique Arnauld:

“I am, and shall be and ever want to be at the mercy of God’s divine providence. I want to hold no rank except that of a servant and a follower...I am again invited to go to Paris under advantageous conditions. I said that I would neither go there nor stay here unless to follow the will of God. This country (Savoy) is my home according to my natural birth; according to my spiritual birth, my home is the Church. I shall willingly go or stay wherever I can best serve the latter without attaching myself to the former.” (*Ibid*, p. 438)

In a Conference to the Sisters of the Visitation, Francis de Sales once quipped: “While all the saints have saved their souls (by following God’s will) they have done so in very different ways...” (Conference XIX, p. 365) All of us are called to follow the will of God, but no two of us will do that in exactly the same way. All of us are called to put ourselves as the disposal of God’s plans, but God’s plan may take each of us in a variety of different directions. Of course, the one constant in the midst of life’s twists and turns is the God whose will we try to accomplish!

How might God ask us to follow His will today?

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(June 17, 2016: Friday of the Eleventh Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Store up treasures in heaven...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life (in a chapter entitled, “We must be Faithful to both Great and Little Tasks”), Francis de Sales wrote:

“The Sacred Spouse implies that He is pleased to accept the great deeds of devout persons, that their least and lowest deeds are also acceptable to Him, and that to serve Him as He wishes we must have great care to serve Him well in both great, lofty matters and in small, unimportant things. With love we can capture His heart by the one just as well as by the other...For a single cup of water God has promised to his faithful a sea of endless bliss. Since such opportunities present themselves from moment to moment it will be a great means of storing up vast spiritual riches if only you use them well.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 35, pp. 213-214)

Do you want to store up treasures in heaven? Do good things for God – be they little or great – as often as you can on this earth.

Each and every day!

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(June 18, 2016: Saturday of the Eleventh Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Do not worry about your life...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life (in a chapter entitled, “We must be Faithful to both Great and Little Tasks”), Francis de Sales wrote:

“The Sacred Spouse implies that He is pleased to accept the great deeds of devout persons, that their least and lowest deeds are also acceptable to Him, and that to serve Him as He wishes we must have great care to serve

Him well in both great, lofty matters and in small, unimportant things. With love we can capture His heart by the one just as well as by the other...For a single cup of water God has promised to his faithful a sea of endless bliss. Since such opportunities present themselves from moment to moment it will be a great means of storing up vast spiritual riches if only you use them well.” (IDL , Part III, Chapter 35, pp. 213-214)

Don't worry about whether or not you are making great progress in the spiritual life. Don't worry about not measuring up! Don't worry about not being perfect! Just simply – with trust and confidence - do good things for God – be they little or great – as often as you can on this earth.

In the process you will slowly – but surely - store up treasures not only in heaven, but also right here, right now on this earth.

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(June 19, 2016: Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord, My God.”

What does it mean to “thirst for God”?

- To desire to know God
- To desire to be close to God
- To desire to walk with God here on earth
- To desire to live with God forever in heaven

Our desire for union with God must be expressed by our efforts to be in union with each other. It is not enough for us only to be in union with God. We must also act like God, perhaps best described by the Beatitude - “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail; they shall be satisfied.”

William Barclay suggests that this hunger – this thirst – is the hunger of those who are starving, the thirst of one who will die without drink. This situation raises the question: how deeply do we want/desire righteousness? Of all the things for which we hunger, how close to the top of the list is a desire to see right prevail?

Those who have this desire may not necessarily see it come to fulfillment on this earth. This is not a perfect world – we are not perfect people. Therefore, it should not surprise or shock us to become aware that we still have a long way to go in making righteousness a reality in the lives of all people. Still, blessedness comes to those who, in spite of failings and failures, still cling to the hunger and thirst for what is right and just...and struggle to make it real in their own little corners of the world.

Francis de Sales once wrote: “I see you have a debt...never withhold from others anything that belongs to them.” (Stopp, Letters, p. 69) To hunger and thirst for God's righteousness means that we must be righteous people. We must do our very best to satisfy our debts to others. Which, of course, begs the question: What do we owe other people?

- Respect
- Reverence
- Courtesy

- Patience
- Honesty
- Truthfulness
- Generosity

To hunger for God and to thirst for God requires, among other things, that we act like God and treat others with the same respect, reverence, courtesy, patience, honesty, truthfulness and generosity with which God treats us.

How hungry – and thirsty – are we for both for God and for one another?

Today!

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(June 20, 2016: Monday, Eleventh Week in Ordinary Time)

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“The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you...”

In his commentary on today’s selection from the Gospel of Matthew, William Barclay wrote:

“Many a time the Rabbis warned people against judging others. ‘He who judges his neighbor favorably,’ they argued, ‘will be judged favorably by God. They decreed that there were six great works which brought a person credit in this world and profit in the world to come – namely, study, visiting the sick, hospitality, devotion in prayer, educating children in the Law and thinking the best of other people. The Jews believed that kindness in judgment was nothing other than a sacred duty.’” (Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1, p. 119-120)

“There is hardly anyone who has not been guilty of gross misjudgment; there is hardly anyone who has not been the victim of someone else’s misjudgment. And yet, the fact is that there is hardly any commandment of Jesus which is more consistently broken and neglected than temptations to judge other people.” (Ibid)

There are three great reasons why we should not judge other people:

1. We never know all of the facts or everything about the person.
2. We are rarely impartial in our judgment.
3. Not one of us is so perfect as to presume to judge any other person.

If these reasons aren’t enough to curb our tendency to judge other people, then heed Jesus’ warning: “The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you.”

In that case, if we can’t refrain from judging others, it might be in our best interest to judge people in the most positive light, that is, to presume the best in others.

With the hope that God – in his mercy – will look for and see the best in us.

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(June 21, 2016: Aloysius Gonzaga, Religious)

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“How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life...”

Striving for perfection - growing in holiness - “living Jesus” - is a formidable challenge. Embracing a life of virtue requires strength and courage. Renouncing sin requires strength and courage. Turning a deaf ear to temptation requires strength and courage. On any given day, our progress in devotion is marked by both success and setback.

However, this striving to be holy is made even more difficult when we attempt to be holy in a way that doesn't fit our state or stage of life - a way of living that doesn't fit who we are. While we are all indeed called to be holy, we are not called to be holy in the in exactly the same way as others. Francis reminds us:

“Devotion (holiness) must be exercised in different ways by the gentleman, the worker, the servant, the prince the widow the young girl and the married woman. I ask you, is it fitting for a bishop to want to live a solitary life like a monk? Or for a married man to want to own no more property than a monk, for a skilled workman to spend his whole day in a church, for a religious to be constantly subject to every sort of call in service to one's neighbor, which is more suited to the bishop? Would not such holiness be laughable, confused and impossible to live?” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 2)

Francis de Sales put it another way in a Conference (On the Virtues of St. Joseph) to the early Visitation community: “Some of the saints excelled in one virtue, some in another, and although all have saved their souls, they have done so in very different ways, there being as many different kinds of sanctity as there are saints.” (Conference XIX, p. 365) A more contemporary reflection on this issue comes from Nobel prize-winning author and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel: “There are a thousand and one gates leading into the orchard of mystical truth. Every human being has his or her own gate. We make a mistake of wanting to enter the orchard by any gate other than our own.” (Night, Page 3)

To be sure, if there is indeed one model of Christian holiness, we find it in Jesus Christ, the one in whom all of us are consecrated. But to be holy - as Jesus is holy - is not about trying to be like someone else. Rather, being holy is about having the strength, integrity and courage to be who God wants each one of us to be, precisely in the places, circumstances and relationships in which we find ourselves each day.

Today, here will you find your gate to holiness?

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(June 22, 2016: John Fisher, Bishop, and Thomas More - Martyrs)

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“By their fruits you will know them...”

Imagine yourself walking through a lush forest in which you encounter a variety of fruit-bearing plants. What would you expect to find along the boughs of an apple tree? Why, apples, of course! What would you expect to find hanging from the branches of a peach tree? Peaches, no doubt! What would you expect to find near the top of a banana tree? Clearly, you'd look for bananas! You approach grape vines. What would you expect to find throughout them? You'd hope to see grapes!

In the opening chapters of his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote: “When he created things God commanded plants to bring forth their fruits, each one according to its kind. In like manner he commands Christians, the living plants of his Church, to bring forth the fruits of devotion, each one according to his position and vocation.” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 3)

Insofar as we are “living plants of the Church,” what kind of fruit(s) should we be producing? He offers some ideas in a letter he wrote four hundred years ago to Mademoiselle de Soulfour: “Let us practice those ordinary virtues suited to our littleness...patience, forbearance toward our neighbor, service to others, humility, gentleness of heart, affability, tolerance of our own imperfections and similar little virtues...” (LSD, p. 98)

How would other people describe us by the fruits that they discover growing in and from us today?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: June 23rd - June 29th

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(June 23, 2016: Thursday, Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote: “You must be ready to suffer many great afflictions for our Lord, even martyrdom itself. However, as long as divine Providence does not send you great, piercing afflictions...bear patiently the slight inconveniences, the little inconveniences and the inconsequential losses that daily come to you...All such little trials when accepted and embraced with love are highly pleasing to God’s mercy.” (IDL, Part II, Chapter 35, pp. 213-214)

When it comes to entering the Kingdom of God, talk is cheap. As we see clearly in the example of Abram, Sarai, and so many others in the selections from the Book of Genesis that we have been hearing this week, there’s a lot less lips service involved with following God’s will and a great deal more hearing – to say nothing of doing it!

How far are we willing to go this day in attempting to follow the will of God – by doing it?

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(June 24, 2016: Nativity of John the Baptist)

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“I make you a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

Francis de Sales wrote: “I have often wondered who is the most mortified of the saints that I know, and after some reflection I have come to the conclusion that it was St. John the Baptist. He went into the desert when he was five years old, and knew that our Savior came to earth in a place quite close by, perhaps only one or two days’ journey. How his heart, touched with love of his Savior from the time he was in his mother’s womb, must have longed to enjoy Christ’s presence. Yet, he spends twenty-five years in the desert without coming to see our Lord even once; and leaving the desert he catechized without visiting him but waiting until our Lord comes to seek him out. Then, after he has baptized Jesus, he does not follow him but stays behind to do his appointed task. How truly mortified was John’s spirit! To be so near his Savior and not see him, to have Him so close and not enjoy His presence! Is this not a completely detached spirit, detached even from God himself so as to do God’s will, and to serve God, as it were to leave God for God, and not to cling to God in order to love him better? The example of this great saint overwhelms me with its grandeur.” (Stopp, Selected Letters, Page 74)

“How truly mortified was John the Baptist’s spirit.” What does Francis de Sales mean? The American Heritage Dictionary defines mortify as to discipline by self-denial or self-inflicted privation. John did, indeed, discipline himself and denied himself many things in order to be faithful to his understanding of the person God wanted him to be - a light to the nations, a light to highlight the coming of Jesus, even when this meant that John would “follow” Jesus by – in fact – staying behind!

Think about it! According to St. Francis de Sales, John spends twenty-five years in the desert preparing to announce Christ’s coming. Despite growing up in the same general area, John meets Christ only once – when he baptized him at the Jordan River – only to remain behind as Jesus recruited others to be his apostles and disciples! John never sees his cousin again.

John was faithful to the role God wanted him to play in the plan of salvation: He played that role supremely well. Listen to what Jesus himself said: “I tell you the truth: among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.” (Matthew 11: 11) However, Jesus continues, “Anyone who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” John shows us that being faithful to God’s will often requires that we deprive ourselves of the desire to “have it all” and to dedicate ourselves to discerning – and embracing – what it is that God wants us to do...and not to do.

Each of us is called – like John – to be “a light to the nations” and help God’s salvation to reach to the ends of the earth.” This assistance doesn’t necessarily mean being the biggest, brightest or best bulb in the chandelier - it means being faithful to the kind of light that God wants you to be when, where and how God wants you to shine!

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(June 25, 2016: Saturday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Only say the word and my servant will be healed. For I, to, am a man subject to authority...”

In a sermon about St. Joseph and the Holy Family, Francis de Sales observed:

“Shall we dare to say that we can very well govern ourselves, and that we have no need of the help and direction of those whom God has given to us for our guidance, not esteeming them, indeed, capable enough for us? Tell me; was the Angel in any way superior to Our Lord or to Our Lady? Had he a better intellect or more judgment? By no means! Was he more qualified for the work of guidance? Was he endowed with any special or peculiar grace? That could not be, seeing that Our Lord is both God and man, and that Our Lady, being His Mother, had, in consequence, more grace and perfection than all the Angels together; nevertheless the Angel commands and is obeyed. See what rank is observed in the Holy Family! No doubt it was the same as it is among sparrow-hawks, where the hen-bird rules and is superior to the male.”

“Who could doubt for a moment that Our Lady was much superior to St. Joseph, and that she had more discretion and qualities more fit for ruling than her spouse? Yet the Angel never addresses himself to her as regards anything that has to be done, either as to going or coming, or whatever it might be. Does it not seem to you that the Angel commits a great indiscretion in addressing himself to St. Joseph rather than to Our Lady, who is the head of the house, as possessing the treasure of the Eternal Father? Had she not just reason to be offended by this proceeding and by this mode of treatment? Doubtless she might have said to her spouse: ‘Why should I go into Egypt, since my Son has not revealed to me that I must go, still less has the Angel spoken to me on the subject?’ Yet Our Lady makes no such remark; she is not in the least offended because the Angel addresses himself to St. Joseph; she obeys quite simply, knowing that God has so ordained it. She does not ask: ‘Why?’ It is sufficient for her that He wills it so, and that it is His pleasure that we should submit without

hesitation. 'But I am more than the Angel,' she might have said, 'and more than St. Joseph.' No such thought occurs to her."

"Let it, then, be enough to know that God wishes us to obey, without occupying ourselves with considering the capability of those whom we are called upon to obey. In this way we shall bring down our minds to walk simply in the happy path of a holy and tranquil humility which will render us infinitely pleasing to God."

This is a great insight that Francis de Sales offers regarding the virtue – and practice – of obedience. The essence of obedience (from the Latin meaning *to listen*) is not doing simply what we're told to do; obedience is recognizing that each person in our lives has a unique role to play in helping us to become the people that God wants us to be. The centurion displayed the virtue of obedience less by telling Jesus to give him an order and more by his recognizing who Jesus was in his life. And, as the Gospel clearly illustrates, this was an obedience with which Jesus was not only well pleased – He was almost awestruck!

How might we imitate the great example of the centurion in our attempts to be obedient – that is, to listen – to the voice of Jesus today?

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(June 26, 2016: Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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"You have been called to live in freedom...out of love, to place yourselves at the service of one another."

The American Heritage Dictionary defines freedom as "the condition of being free of restraints, the liberty of the person from slavery, detention or oppression - the capacity to exercise choice: free will."

God created us with free will. God created us to live in freedom.

The Salesian tradition - for that matter, Christianity - makes a distinction between free will and freedom. In his Treatise on the Love of God, St. Francis de Sales wrote:

"Our free will can stop or obstruct the course of God's inspiration. When the favorable wind of God's grace fills the sails of our soul, it is within our power to refuse consent, thereby impeding the effect of that favoring wind. But when our spirit sails along and makes a prosperous voyage, it is not we who cause the wind of inspiration to come to us. We neither fill our sails with it, nor do we give movement to the ship that is our heart: we consent to its movement. It is God's inspiration, then, which impresses on our free will the gentle, blessed influence whereby it not only causes the will to see the beauty of the good, but also warms it, helps it, reinforces it and moves it so gently that by its agency, the will turns and glides freely toward the good." (TLG, Book 4, Chapter 6)

We have the power to make choices. We can use our free will to do what is right and good in the eyes of God. By contrast, we can also use our free will to do what is sinful and shameful in the eyes of God. Our free will makes us truly free only when we use it to cooperate with God's grace and inspiration, by placing ourselves at the service of others out of love. When we use our free will to obstruct or turn away from God's grace and inspiration, we are not living in freedom at all. By contrast, we make ourselves (and sometimes, by extension, others) slaves of sin.

What's the bottom line? Our "free will" isn't freedom at all, unless we use it to pursue a life of truth, a life of righteousness, a life of justice, a life of reconciliation and a life of service. Our "free will," as it turns out, isn't

really free at all; rather, it brings with it an awesome responsibility: to feed, to nourish, to heal, to challenge and to raise up one another in imitation of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the model of what it truly means to live in freedom. He always - *always* - made choices that were consistent with the Father's dream and destiny for him. His free will was truly freeing because Jesus faithfully placed his ability to choose at the disposal of his Father, at the disposal of the Kingdom of God and at the service of his brothers and sisters.

We indeed have free will. Today, consider this question: are we using it - like Jesus - in ways that make us - and others - truly free?

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(June 27, 2016: Cyril of Alexandria, Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

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"You sit speaking against your brother; against your mother's son you spread rumors...Shall I be deaf to it ? I will correct you by drawing them up before your eyes." (Responsorial Psalm)

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales exhorted:

"Never slander anyone either directly or indirectly. Beware of falsely imputing crimes and sins to your neighbor, revealing his secret sins, exaggerating those that are manifest, putting an evil interpretation on his good works, denying the good that you know belongs to someone or maliciously concealing it or lessening it by words. You would offend God in all these ways but most of all by false accusations and denying the truth to your neighbor's harm. It is a double sin to lie and harm your neighbor at the same time." (IDL, Part III, Chapter 29, p. 202)

Let's say that we are making progress in refraining from saying anything against other people that would either exaggerate their vices or diminish their virtues. Let's say that our consciences are clear because we are making strides in refraining from bad-mouthing other people or putting other people down. Are we in the clear? Not quite! At least, not in St. Francis de Sales' opinion, for in the same chapter he stated:

"When you hear anyone spoken ill of, make the accusation doubtful if you can do so justly. If you cannot, excuse the intention of the accused party. If that cannot be done, express sympathy for that person change the subject of conversation, reminding yourself and others that those who do not fall into sin owe it all to God's grace. Confront the slanderer in a mild way and tell of some good deed of the offended party if you are aware of any." (*Ibid*, pp. 205-206)

Do you want to rid the world of rumors? It isn't enough to refrain from spreading them ourselves, but we must also be willing to speak up when we hear them spread by others.

Today, if you hear something uncharitable, say something! Like God, don't be deaf to it – address it!

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(June 28, 2016: Irenaeus, Bishop and Martyr)

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"Why are you terrified?"

Given the fact that the disciples were caught out in open water in a violent storm would be plenty of reason to be terrified, regardless of whether Jesus was with them or not. In the event, the disciples' terror quickly subsided, when they witnessed the calming power of Jesus.

In a letter to Madame Gasparde de Ballon, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Regarding your fears, they are the work of the enemy who sees that you are quite determined to live in Our Lord without any reserves and exceptions. The evil one will make every sort of effort to upset you and make the way of holy devotion seem hard for you. What you must do to counteract this is to open your heart and often repeat your protestation never to give in, always to keep faith, to love the challenges of God's service more than the sweetness of the world's service and to say that you will never leave God's side. Be very careful not to give up on prayer, for that would be playing into the hand of your adversary. Instead, continue to go steadfastly with this holy exercise and wait for Our Lord to speak to you, for one day he will say words of peace and consolation to you. Then you will know that your trouble will have been well spent and your patience and trust useful... Say often: *May Jesus reign!*” (Selected Letters, Stopp, pp. 225 - 226)

We all have things in life that should concern, scare - and even - terrify us. Jesus isn't asking us to never be fearful or even terrified; rather, Jesus asks us to trust him precisely in times of timidity and terror.

No matter how daunting the storms of life may be, don't allow them to shake your faith in God's love for you and fidelity to you. Regardless of how your boat may get rocked during the course of your life, Jesus will never - never - abandon you. He will either calm the storms for you or ride them out with you.

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(June 29, 2016: Peter and Paul, Apostles)

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“I have completed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.”

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul – Apostles.

Of Saint Peter, Francis de Sales wrote: “St. Peter was chosen to be the chief of the Apostles, although he was subject to so many imperfections that he even committed some after he had received the Holy Spirit, because, notwithstanding these defects, he was always full of courage, never allowing himself to be dismayed by his shortcomings.” (Conferences, Number IV, Page 63)

Francis expounds upon this duality of Peter's nature in his Treatise on the Love of God. “Who would not marvel at the heart of St. Peter, so bold among armed soldiers that out of all of his master's company he alone takes his sword in hand and strikes out with it? Yet a little afterwards among ordinary people he is so cowardly that at the mere word of a servant girl he denies and detests his master.” (TLG, Book X, Chapter 9, p, 167)

Now let us turn our attention to some of what Francis de Sales said about St. Paul. “He fights for all people, he pours forth prayers for all people, he is passionately jealous in behalf of all people, and he is on fire for all people. Yes, he even dared more than this for ‘those according to the flesh,’ so that, if I dare to say so, he desires by charity that they may be put in his place with Jesus Christ. O perfection of courage and unbelievable spirit!” (Treatise, Book X, Chapter 16, pp. 188 – 189)

Of course, as in the case of Peter, Paul, too, has his shortcomings. In a letter of encouragement to a sister of the Visitation, Francis wrote: “Do not be ashamed...any more than St. Paul who confessed that there were two men in him, one rebellious to God and the other obedient to God.” (Stopp, Selected Letters, page 224.)

“I competed well; I have finished the race.” Paul wrote these words, but they could also be said of Peter. But note well – they both *finished* well. By contrast, look at their earlier track records. Peter was called “Satan” by Jesus and Peter denied Him three times. While Paul, he began his public life by persecuting the early Church as Saul. Neither man’s resumes were particularly impressive!

When it comes to being an apostle, a disciple or follower of Jesus Christ, perhaps this is the most important thing to remember – as imperfect as we are, where we’ve been isn’t nearly as important as where we are going with the grace of God and the support of one another.

All’s well that ends well!

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Spirituality Matters 2016: June 30th - July 6th

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(June 30, 2016: First Martyrs of the Holy Roman Church)

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“Why do you harbor evil thoughts?”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales claimed that impugning the motives of others is a primary source of much of the sin and iniquity with which our world is plagued.

We witness slander when someone falsely imputes crimes and sins toward another person. We see slander when someone reveals others’ secret faults or exaggerates faults that are already obvious to everyone. We hear slander when someone ascribes evil motives to the good deeds that another does or attempts to minimize - or deny them - all together.

In today’s Gospel we see such slander in action. Perhaps slander in thought only, but slander nonetheless.

After forgiving the sins of a paralyzed man, Jesus is palpably aware of what was going through the minds of the scribes – they secretly assumed that such action made Jesus guilty of blasphemy, that is, of usurping the power and authority of God. They were determined to turn any good that Jesus did into something bad. Jesus response is swift and twofold – he calls them out for their secret, distorted thinking and then powerfully proves by what power and authority he forgives sins by healing the same man of his physical paralysis.

Would that Jesus could have healed the attitudinal paralysis of the scribes so easily, a paralysis stemming from the slanderous manner with which they viewed Jesus because when they weren’t falsely accusing him of assorted crimes and sins, they attempted to minimize – or discredit entirely – the good that he accomplished and the healings that he performed.

What is the moral is this Gospel? There are far worse ways of being incurably paralyzed other than being unable to walk.

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(July 1, 2016: Junipero Serra, Priest)

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“Follow me.”

“In 1776, while the American Revolution was beginning in the east, another part of the future nation that would become known as the United States of America was being born in California. That year a gray-robed Franciscan founded Mission San Juan Capistrano. San Juan was the seventh of nine missions established under the direction of this indomitable Spaniard.”

“Born on Spain’s island of Mallorca, Serra entered the Franciscan Order, taking the name of St. Francis’ childlike companion, Brother Juniper. Until he was 35, he spent most of his time in the classroom—first as a student of theology and then as a professor. He also became famous for his preaching. Suddenly he gave it all up and followed the yearning that had begun years before when he heard about the missionary work of St. Francis Solanus in South America. Junipero’s desire was to convert native peoples in the New World.”

“Arriving by ship at Vera Cruz, Mexico, he and a companion walked the 250 miles to Mexico City. On the way Junipero’s left leg became infected by an insect bite and would remain a cross—sometimes life-threatening—for the rest of his life. For 18 years he worked in central Mexico and in the Baja Peninsula. He became president of the missions there.”

“When rumors swirled that Russian might attempt to occupy much of the American west coast south from Alaska. Charles III of Spain ordered an expedition to beat Russia to the territory. So the last two conquistadors—one military, one spiritual—began their quest. José de Galvez persuaded Junipero to set out with him for present-day Monterey, California. The first mission founded after the 900-mile journey north was San Diego (1769). That year a shortage of food almost canceled the expedition. Vowing to stay with the local people, Junipero and another friar began a novena in preparation for St. Joseph’s day, March 19, the scheduled day of departure. On that day, the relief ship arrived.”

“Other missions followed: Monterey/Carmel (1770); San Antonio and San Gabriel (1771); San Luís Obispo (1772); San Francisco and San Juan Capistrano (1776); Santa Clara (1777); San Buenaventura (1782). Twelve more were founded after Serra’s death.”

“Junipero’s missionary life was a long battle with cold and hunger, with unsympathetic military commanders and even with danger of death from non-Christian native peoples. Through it all his unquenchable zeal was fed by prayer each night, often from midnight till dawn. He baptized over 6,000 people and confirmed 5,000. His travels would have circled the globe. He brought the Native Americans not only the gift of faith but also a decent standard of living. He won their love, as witnessed especially by their grief at his death. He is buried at Mission San Carlo Borromeo, Carmel, and was beatified in 1988.”

<http://www.americancatholic.org/features/saints/saint.aspx?id=1431>

In the case of Junipero Serra, following Jesus resulted in his blazing a trail (some accounts suggest up to a total of 24,000 miles!) in the New World out of love for God and neighbor. How might we imitate him by doing our level best to see the “Old World” with new eyes?

Today!

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(July 2, 2016: Saturday of the Thirteenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Why do we and the Pharisees fast much, but your disciples do not fast?”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales observed:

“If you can stand fasting, you will do well to fast on certain days in addition to those prescribed by the Church. Besides the usual effects of fasting, namely, elevating our spirits, keeping the body in submission, practicing virtue and gaining greater reward in heaven, it is valuable for restraining gluttony and keeping our sensual appetites and body subject to the law of the spirit.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 23, p. 185)

From a Salesian perspective, there is a place for fasting in the spiritual life. However, fasting is not the only method for “elevating our spirits, keeping the body in submission, practicing virtue and gaining greater reward in heaven.” So is work!

Francis continued:

“Both fasting and labor mortify and subdue the flesh. If your work is necessary for you to contribute to God’s glory, I prefer that you endure the pains of work rather than that of fasting. Such is the mind of the Church...One man finds it difficult to fast, while another is called to care for the sick, visit prisoners, hear confessions, preach, comfort the afflicted, pray and perform similar tasks. These latter disciplines are of greater value than the first: besides subduing the body, they produce much more desirable fruits.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 185 – 186)

Why didn’t Jesus’ disciples fast? It seems they were too busy contributing to God’s glory by serving the needs of others.

There are two ways of contributing to God’s glory: fasting (*doing without*) and laboring (*doing*).

Which way will you pursue today?

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(July 3, 2016: Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“For neither does circumcision mean anything, nor does uncircumcision, but only a new creation.”

On any given day, most of us spend the bulk of our time, talent and energy dealing with and trying to balance all the things in life that are the most pressing: keeping appointments, making deadlines, surviving the daily commute, driving to/from soccer games, paying bills, shopping for food, managing the household, monitoring homework, eating, sleeping, etc., etc., etc.

Where are we supposed to find the time to do “what really matters - to be created anew?”

Pursuing things in life that really matter does not mean that we turn our backs on those things that are most pressing - quite the contrary! Francis de Sales said: “Be careful and attentive to all the matters God has committed to your care: since God has entrusted them to you, God wishes that you have great care for them.” You know, things like: keeping appointments, making deadlines, surviving the daily commute, driving to/from soccer games, paying bills, shopping for food, managing the household, monitoring homework, eating, sleeping, etc., etc., etc.

Keeping in mind the things that really matter means keeping in perspective all the things that keep us busy: “Do not be worried, that is, don't exert yourself over them with uneasiness, anxiety and

forwardness,” observed Francis de Sales. “Don't be worried about them, for worry disturbs reason and good judgment and prevents us from doing well the very things about which we are worried in the first place.”

Living a happy, healthy and holy life isn't about having to choose between fulfilling our commitments and responsibilities or pursuing that which is most important. It is not an either/or proposition. In the Salesian tradition, it is only when we keep before our eyes what really matters – “that we be created anew” - that we can truly do justice to all the things that we find on our plates each day.

The most important thing for Jesus was to proclaim the power and the promise of the Good News of salvation, redemption, life and love. However, as today's Gospel clearly demonstrates, pursuing the things that really matter can generate more than a few "to-do" lists for us, just as it did for Jesus and his disciples.

And so then, throughout each day try to keep in mind and heart the things that really matter. Stay grounded in God's desire for you to be created anew. Keep before your eyes the image of the gentle, humble Christ who walks with you throughout every moment of each day. Recall God's invitation to you to embody the Good News in ways appropriate for the stage and circumstances of life in which you find yourself.

But don't take too much time. After all, we've got a lot of stuff – some new and others – all-too-familiar - on our plates today!

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(July 4, 2016: Independence Day)

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“I will espouse you in right and in justice...”

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen nited States of America.

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary...to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them...We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The Declaration of Independence has more than a little bit in common with the Good News of Jesus Christ. After all, Jesus proclaimed the equality that comes from knowing that God loves everything (and everyone) that he has created. Secondly, Jesus preached that the essence of liberty is to be faithful to the will of God, that is, to be the kind of people that God created us to be. Finally, Jesus pointed out that the source of real happiness is found in placing ourselves at the service of others.

Of course, not only did Jesus proclaim, preach and point out these things – he also embodied these truths. He lived them.

Do you want to experience the Life, Liberty and Happiness that only Jesus can give? Then, do what is right – do what is just.

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(July 5, 2016: Elizabeth of Portugal)

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"At the sight of the crowds his heart was moved..."

In commenting upon the Beatitude, "Blessed are those who mourn..." William Barclay wrote: "It is first of all to be noted about this beatitude that the Greek word for to mourn – used here – is the strongest word for mourning in the Greek language. It is the mourning that is used for mourning for the dead, for the passionate lament for one who was loved...it is defined as the kind of grief that takes such a hold on a man that it cannot be hidden. It is not only the sorrow which brings an ache to the heart; it is the sorrow which brings the unrestrained tear to the eyes..." (The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1, p. 93)

In the case of Jesus, it is this sorrow that moves his heart and releases miraculous power!

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales cites one of two virtues associated with mourning or sadness: "**Compassion.**"(IDL, Part IV, Chapter 12, p. 253) At the sight of the man with a dead daughter and the woman with a chronic illness in yesterday's Gospel, Jesus' heart was deeply moved: the woman was cured and the girl was raised. In today's Gospel Jesus' heart was deeply moved as He taught in synagogues, proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom and cured every disease and illness. At the sight of the crowds, Jesus' heart was moved. Feeling overwhelmed by the sheer size and scale of the neediness that He himself was encountering in others, Jesus asked His disciples to pray that God send more laborers for His harvest. In tomorrow's Gospel, Jesus' heart will move Him to go a step further with this request: He himself will commission his disciples to be those very laborers.

Whenever Jesus' heart was moved by the sight of others' needs, power was released in Him: the people were taught, the sick were healed, the possessed were freed, the lost were found and the dead were raised. These actions are the heart of compassion, because it's not enough merely to feel sorry for someone else's plight. Compassion requires that we do something to address another's plight. Compassion is more than just feeling; compassion is more about doing.

Are we willing to take our rightful place as laborers for God's harvest today?

At the sight of other people's needs, will our hearts – like the heart of Jesus himself – be moved to meet their needs?

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(July 6, 2016: Maria Goretti, Virgin and Martyr)

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"Sow for yourselves justice, reap the fruit of piety."

Wikipedia defines piety as "a virtue that can mean religious devotion, spirituality or a combination of both. A common element in most conceptions is humility." *Merriam-Webster* defines piety as (1) "the quality of being religious or reverent," and (2) "the quality of being dutiful." Synonyms include: "devoutness, godliness, religiousness and devotion."

In a letter to Madame de Limojon, Francis de Sales wrote: "I have said this to you in person, madam, and now I write it: I don't want a devotion that is bizarre, confused, neurotic, strained, and sad, but rather, a gentle, attractive, peaceful piety; in a word, a piety that is quite spontaneous and wins the love of God, first of all, and after that, the love of others." (Letters of Spiritual Direction, p. 156)

As Francis de Sales understood it, piety is less a function of how many prayers we say, how many spiritual exercises we perform or how many hours we spend on our knees (although these things do have their place!).

No, piety is more about being devout, about being “dutiful,” that is, about honoring what is due to God and honoring what is due to our neighbor.

In other words, piety is about justice; piety is about doing what is right.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, (Book XI, Chapter 3, p. 202) Francis observed: “Of all virtuous actions we ought most carefully practice those of religion and reverence for divine things. Such are the acts of faith, hope and holy fear of God. We must often speak of heavenly things, think of eternity and sigh for it, frequent churches and sacred services, read devout books and observe the ceremonies of the Christian religion...” Provided, of course, that all these nourish “sacred love.”

Today, do you want to reap “the fruit of piety”? Then, sow justice for God; sow justice for others.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: July 7th - July 13th

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(July 7, 2016: Thursday, Fourteenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.”

What could be more humbling than to consider all the good that God has done for us, is doing for us and will do for us? Well, perhaps even more humbling is the realization that God’s goodness, mercy and generosity come without cost or condition. Insofar as we are created from nothing, we have done nothing to deserve God’s overwhelming blessings, gifts and love. They are unconditionally free gifts!

In a conference to the Sisters of the Visitation on the virtue of generosity, Francis de Sales remarked:

“We must indeed keep ourselves humble because of our imperfections, but this humility must be the foundation of a great generosity. Humility without generosity is only a deception and a cowardice of the heart that makes us think that we are good for nothing and that others should never think of using us in anything great. On the other hand, generosity without humility is only presumption. We may indeed say, ‘It is true I have no virtue, still less the necessary gifts to be used in such and such an endeavor,’ but after that humble acknowledgement we must put our full confidence in God as to believe that He will not fail to give His gifts to us when it is necessary to have them, and when He wants us to make use of us, provided only that we forget ourselves in praising faithfully His Divine majesty and helping our neighbor to do the same so as to increase His glory as much as lies in our power.” (Living Jesus, p. 152)

On one level it is true to say that we are “nothing”, creatures that we are. But because of the God who has created us, each and every one of us is – in God’s eyes – marvelous to behold. What a humbling, empowering gift!

What better way today to say “thank you” for such gift than to freely and generously share who we are and what we have with one another?

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(July 8, 2016: Friday, Fourteenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say...”

In a letter to Jane de Chantal in 1606, Francis de Sales wrote:

“I cannot think of anything else to say to you about your apprehension of your particular troubles, nor of the fear of being unable to bear it. Did I not tell you the first time I spoke to you about your soul that you pay too much attention to what afflicts or frightens you? You must do so only in great moderation! People frequently reflect too much about their troubles and this entangles thoughts and fears and desires to the point that the soul is constricted and cannot be itself. Don’t be afraid of what God has in store for you – love God very much for He wants to do you a great deal of good. Carry on quite simply in the shelter of your resolutions and reject anticipations of your troubles as simply a cruel temptation...Fear is a greater evil than the evil itself, but if terror should seize you cry out loudly to God. He will stretch forth his hand towards you – grab it tightly and go joyfully on your way.” (Selected Letters, Stopp, pp. 124 -125)

Francis de Sales recommends that we begin every new day with what he calls a “preparation of the day”. Consider all the things you may need to accomplish today. Think about the people and situations that you may encounter today. When you finished, does anything, place or person you may face today make you worry, anxious or fearful?

Take hold of God’s hand, and do your best to go joyfully through your day!

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(July 9, 2016: Augustine Zhao Rong, Priest and Companions - Martyrs)

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“Do not be afraid.....”

In the same letter that we considered yesterday, Francis de Sales wrote to Jane de Chantal concerning the issues of worry, anxiety and fear. We read:

“Don’t philosophize about your trouble – don’t argue with it. Quite simply, continue to walk straight on. God would not allow you to be lost while you live according to your resolutions so as not to lose him. If the whole world turns topsy-turvy, if all around is darkness and smoke and din, yet God is still with us. So, if we know that God lives in the darkness and on Mount Sinai which is full of smoke and surrounded with the roar of thunder and lightning, shall not all be well with us as long as we remain close to him? So, live wholly in God, and do not fear. Jesus in his goodness is all ours; let us be all his. Let us cling to him with courage!” (Selected Letters, Stopp, pp. 124 -125)

This exhortation is very challenging! After all, who of us can say that they have never been afraid, worried or anxious? Doesn’t even the Book of Proverbs (9:10) claim that “fear (of the Lord) is the beginning of wisdom?” Some things should scare us!

Let’s look at it this way. While we may have our share of fears in life, it is critical that we try our level best to avoid becoming people who are fearful and become people who are joyful!

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(July 10, 2016: Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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"This command that I enjoin on you today...is already in your mouths and in your hearts; all that remains is for you to carry it out."

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indiana Jones asks his mentor, Marcus Brody: "Do you believe, Marcus? Do you believe that the grail exists?" His older friend and mentor soberly and softly replies: "The search for the cup of Christ is the search for the divine in all of us."

The search for the divine is not about going to far away places. The search for the divine is not about looking up to the sky. The search for the divine is not about crossing great oceans. No, the search for the divine is about the greatest - and sometimes the most challenging - adventure of all: the search within ourselves. It is a journey to the heart, to the soul and to the core and the center of our being.

Francis de Sales certainly believed this truth. He wrote in his Introduction to the Devout Life: "God is in all things and in all places. There is no place or thing in their world in which God is not truly present." But this, says Francis de Sales, is not enough, for "God is not only in the place where you are; God is also present in a most particular manner in your heart, in the very center of your spirit." (Part II, Chapter 2)

Of course, the search for the divine in all of us is not limited to a journey to the heart. The search for - and recognition of - the divine in us must be pursued in the other great journey - reaching out and caring for one another.

Jesus makes this point powerfully in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Two people, who should have known better (especially given their intellectual training), walked past a neighbor in need - certainly no way of acknowledging the presence of the divine in another. Clearly, and perhaps more tragically, this action is indicative of their failure to acknowledge God's abiding presence within themselves.

The third man, by contrast, is "moved to compassion" at the plight of the other person in need. He is able to reach out to him because he first had the courage to see inside himself the presence of a God who loves and cares for him - the presence of a God who called him to do the same for others.

We know that God dwells everywhere, but most especially he dwells in our hearts. Francis de Sales challenges us: "Examine your heart often. Does your heart look upon your neighbor in the same way as you would like your neighbor's heart to look upon you?"

All that remains for us is "to carry it out," to extend our hearts - and in us, the heart of God - to our neighbors in need.

As in the case of so many things, easier said than done!!

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(July 11, 2016: Benedict, Abbot)

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"Put away misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim..."

Cease doing evil; learn to do good. This is a no-brainer, right? Well, maybe yes, maybe no. While we may know the difference between good and evil, actually doing what is good - and actually avoiding what is evil - is another thing all together.

In a sermon on “The Seven Gifts”, Francis de Sales observed: “The Holy Spirit’s gift of knowledge is essential if we are to know...how to be capable of discerning the evil to be avoided and the good to be sought. Whence comes this gift of knowledge to distinguish between good and evil, virtue and vice if not from the Holy Spirit?” But merely distinguishing between good and evil is not enough. Francis opined: “Nothing is more common than to find theologians who are more effective at describing virtues than at practicing them.” (Pulpit and Pew, pp. 150 – 151)

We need help to put our knowledge into action. Fortunately for us, the same Holy Spirit that gives us knowledge gives us yet another gift to help us to put our knowledge into practice. Of this gift – fortitude – Francis observed: “This is absolutely essential to us; the ability to tell good from evil is of little use if we lack strength to avoid the one and to engage in the other. Nothing is more common than to find people who know what is right but who lack the courage to do it.” (Ibid, p. 152) Fortitude gives us the courage – the heart – that we need to cease doing evil and to do what is good.

Two down and one to go. Francis continues:

“The next gift is the gift of counsel; absent this gift and fortitude would be mere rashness. The strength of an army needs the counsel of a commander. Fear causes us to break away from sinful habits; knowledge helps us to see what is wrong; fortitude gives us the courage to act on our knowledge. But we need the help of counsel if we are to know how to tackle what knowledge has taught us. What this gift enables us to discern is how to carry out what the Holy Spirit teaches us.” (Ibid, pp. 153-154)

There’s more to putting “away misdeeds from before” God’s eyes than meets the eye. We need the knowledge to distinguish good from evil; we need the courage to do good and to avoid evil; we need the counsel to decide how best to accomplish this spiritual goal. Thank God for the abundance of these gifts! Today, ask God for the grace to use these gifts well!

With the aim of doing justice!

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(July 12, 2016: Tuesday, Fifteenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Take care to remain tranquil and do not fear. Let not your courage fail...”

In a sermon given to the Visitation Sisters in Annecy in April 1620, Francis de Sales preached:

“The apostles and disciples were afraid. They were children without a father, soldiers without a leader. While they were in hiding our Lord appeared to them; He brought them comfort and encouragement. ‘Peace be upon you,’ was his greeting. ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’ He seemed to ask, ‘Why are you so fearful and upset? Look at my hands; look at my wounds...’ It is of peace that I wish to speak to you – the peace of the Gospel. Where Gospel precepts are ignored there is nothing but trouble; nothing but strife.” (Pulpit and Pew, p. 198)

Francis de Sales warns us, however, not to confuse peace with tranquility. The peace that Jesus offers makes no provision for a carefree or trouble-free life. He observed: “People delude themselves into thinking that pain and misfortune have no place where our Lord is; they believe that God’s presence produces only constant happiness. However, the opposite is true: God is never so close to us as when we are in trouble or difficulty, for it is precisely in these moments that our need for God’s protection and help is greatest.” (Ibid, p. 199)

This sequence of events should come as no surprise to us. After all, the same Jesus who promised us peace is the same Jesus who told us: “In this world you will have trouble, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (John 16: 33)

Are you dealing with difficult issues? Are you having trouble with life’s challenges? Are you losing your nerve? Don’t make it worse by losing your courage. Remain tranquil; do not fear.

Take care in the midst of all your cares.

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(July 13, 2016: Henry)

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“Judgment will be with justice, and the upright of heart shall follow it...”

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines judgment as “the process of forming an opinion or evaluation by discerning and comparing an idea that is believed to be true or valid without positive knowledge.” Synonyms include: belief, conclusion, conviction, [determination](#), [diagnosis](#), eye, mind, notion, [opinion](#), [resolution](#), sentiment, [verdict](#) and view.

OK. Then, it should be obvious that a world without judgment (and things akin to it) would be a pretty chaotic place. We need to be able to make determinations, draw conclusions, form opinions and develop views in order to make our way through life. The challenge (presented to us in today’s Responsorial Psalm) is to render judgments that are just; the temptation is to make judgments that are rash.

In his [Introduction to the Devout Life](#), Francis de Sales wrote: “How offensive to God are rash judgments! The judgments of the children of men are rash because they are not the judges of one another, and when they pass judgment on others they usurp the office of our Lord. Such judgments are rash because the principal malice of sin depends on the intention and counsel of the heart. They are rash because every man has enough on which he ought to judge himself without taking it upon himself to judge his neighbors...fear, ambition and similar mental weaknesses often contribute to the birth of suspicion and rash judgment.” ([IDL](#), Part III, Chapter 28, p. 196-197)

What is the cure for rash, unjust judgments? “Drink as deeply as you can of the sacred wine of charity. It will set you free from the perverse moods that cause us to make such tortured judgments, for whoever wants to be cured must apply remedies not to one’s eyes or intellect but to one’s affections. If your reflections are kind, your judgments will be kind; if your affections are charitable, your judgments will be the same.” (*Ibid*, pp. 198-199)

What is Francis de Sales’ advice for those dedicated to judging justly? “Those who look carefully into their consciences are not very likely to pass rash judgments. Just as bees in misty or cloudy weather stay in their lives to prepare honey, so also the thoughts of good men do not go out in search of things concealed among the cloudy actions of their neighbors. It is the part of an unprofitable soul to amuse itself with examining the lives of other people.” Duly note, however, an important caveat that Francis wrote: “I except those who are placed in charge of others, whether within a family or in the state. For them a great part of their duties consists in inspecting and watching over the conduct of others. In such cases as these, let those responsible for others discharge their duty and make judgments with love.” (*Ibid*, pp. 200-201)

If/when you need to make judgments, avoid the temptation to do so rashly. If/when you need to make judgments, do so justly.

With love!

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Spirituality Matters 2016: July 14th - July 20th

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(July 14, 2016: Kateri Tekakwitha, Virgin)

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“Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart...”

In her book entitled Heart Speaks to Heart: The Salesian Tradition, Wendy M. Wright writes:

“The Jesus of gentleness and humility is not a sentimental figure. In the Salesian world of hearts these qualities belong to God’s own kingdom. If one looks carefully, one sees that the passage in Matthew 11 that issues its invitation is located in a scriptural discourse on the mystery of the kingdom of God. That mystery of the kingdom of God the Father, the passage continues, is revealed through the Son. ‘Come to Me,’ he declares, ‘and learn from Me for I am gentle and humble of heart.’ God’s-kingdom-realized is thus seen in this gentle, humble heart that confounds and overturns the values of the accepted order. It is not power over others, self-assertion or wealth that characterize God’s reign, but love of God and neighbor exercised through all the intimate, relational virtues like gentleness and humility...Discipleship is the lifelong opening of the heart to be transformed by and inhabited by Jesus’ own gentle heart...” (Pp. 33-34)

The meekness that Jesus embodies is not weakness; it is strength. The humility that Jesus embodies is not thinking less about oneself; it is thinking about oneself less. This meek Jesus is all about power; this humble Jesus is all about using His power to help others.

This passage in Scripture was Francis de Sales’ favorite. The “meek and humble” Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel transformed Francis’ life and the lives of so many others whose lives he touched. Not to put too fine a point on it, but this “meek and humble” Jesus transformed Francis into a saint.

Jesus wants to do the same for - and with - us; Jesus wants to make us saints. Are we meek and humble enough to accept His invitation?

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(July 15, 2016: Bonaventure, Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

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“I have heard your prayer and seen your tears....”

In a sermon he preached in Lent 1622, Francis de Sales observed:

“The Canaanite woman did not become discouraged in her prayer. For although she saw that Our Lord was paying no attention to her prayers (since He gave her no word of response and seemed to do her an injustice) nevertheless this woman persevered in crying out after Him: so much so that the Apostles were constrained to tell Him that He should dismiss her because she did nothing but cry out after them. Because of this some are of the opinion that since Our Savior gave her no word of response, she addressed herself to the Apostles, asking them to intercede for her. This is why they said, ‘She keeps crying out after us.’ Others believe that she did not

ask them, but that she continued to cry out to the Lord. Nevertheless, although Our Lord appeared to turn a deaf ear to all that, she did not fail to continue her prayer.” (Living Jesus, p. 303)

We shouldn't assume that God doesn't hear us if it sometimes seems that God is taking a long time in answering our prayers. As the Book of the Prophet Isaiah reminds us, God always hears our prayers; God does see our tears. In a letter to one of her daughters – one of her biological daughters – Jane de Chantal once wrote: “We owe everything to the goodness of our Lord who has watched over us and who has heard our prayers...Be assured that God who has been mindful of you will not forget you if you abandon yourself to His tender care...” (Letters of Spiritual Direction, P. 211)

God does see us; God does hear us. So then, what's stopping us from giving voice to our prayers?

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(July 16, 2016: Our Lady of Mount Carmel)

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“Woe to those who plan iniquity, and work out evil on their couches...”

Oh, come on! Who actually plans iniquity? Who actually sits around and plans on doing evil?

How about those who gossip? How about those who bad-mouth others or who disparage others in speech? In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales observed:

“To scoff at others is one of the worst states in which a mind can find itself. God detests this vice and in past times inflicted strange punishments on it. Nothing is so opposed to charity – and much more to devotion – than to despise and condemn one's neighbors. Derision and mockery are always accompanied by scoffing, and it is therefore a very great sin. Theologians consider it one of the worst offenses against one's neighbor of which a person can be guilty. Other offenses may be committed with some esteem for the person offended, but this treats a person with scorn and contempt.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 27, pp. 195-196)

We all know from our own experience that speaking negatively about others is all too easy. Be it planned or spontaneous, God is very clear: woe to those who engage in evil things, evil things like bad-mouthing others.

Today, what strategies might we employ to avoid woes like these?

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(July 17, 2016: Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“You are anxious and worried about many things.”

We are all-too familiar with this image from the Gospel according to Luke. All-too familiar because it is all-too-easy to see in this Gospel a putdown of action and activity as compared with prayer and contemplation.

However, need to revisit this interpretation. We need to understand how this Gospel speaks about Martha and Mary. More importantly, we need to consider how this Gospel speaks to us.

Jesus does not criticize Martha for being busy about the details of hospitality. Rather, Jesus criticizes the fact that Martha is allowing her activity and expectations to make her anxious. Likewise, Mary is not exalted due to

her inactivity, but rather because she is not burdened with anxiety. In short, Martha is upset and flustered, while Mary is calm and centered.

Both Martha and Mary bring something to the experience of hospitality. In Martha, we see the importance of tending to details when welcoming people into our homes. In Mary, we see the importance of welcoming people into our lives, into our hearts, into the core of the person we are without allowing the details to overwhelm us.

Hospitality isn't a matter of choosing between activity and availability. It is a matter of incorporating – and integrating – both.

Francis de Sales certainly knew this fact when he described the two great faces of love: the love of complacency and the love of benevolence. Complacency is love that delights in simply being in the presence of the beloved; benevolence is love that delights in expressing this complacency by doing for the beloved.

Doing and being. Being and doing. This is the dance of hospitality. This is the dance of love...a dance that challenges us to be as free as possible from anxious self-absorption and self-preoccupation.

In order to be truly open, to be truly welcoming, to be truly hospitable, there needs to be something of Martha and Mary in all of us. We need to be equally at peace with all the details and demands that come with trying to do justice to both.

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(July 18, 2016: Camillus de Lellis, Priest)

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“You have been told what the Lord requires of you: do the right and love goodness and walk humbly with your God...”

In a letter to “a person of piety”, Francis de Sales wrote:

“The more humility costs you, the more graces it will give you. Continue then to discipline your heart by humility and exalt it by charity...Study this lesson deeply, for it is the one lesson of our sovereign Master: ‘Learn of me because I am meek and humble of heart.’ How happy you will be, if you resign yourself fully to the will of Our Lord. Yes, for this holy willing is all good and its execution all good. There is no better path to walk other than under His providence and guidance.” (Living Jesus, p. 145)

Humility is not about having no life; humility is about laying down our lives – giving our lives – in the service of others. Of course, “laying down our lives” can sound overwhelming, especially when we consider the dramatic way in which Jesus laid down his life on the cross of Calvary. As St. Francis de Sales constantly reminds us, however, for most of us this giving of our lives gets played out in little, ordinary ways - like doing what is right and loving what is good.

We know what the Lord requires of us: to walk humbly with God, that is, to do what is right and to love what is good in our relationships with others.

And to know true happiness in the process!

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(July 19, 2016: Tuesday, Sixteenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, sister and mother...”

In the opinion of William Barclay, this selection from Matthew’s Gospel offers us an expanded notion of the ties that bind - a new way of looking at kinship, family and friendship. He wrote:

“True kinship is not always a matter of flesh and blood relationship. It remains true that blood is a tie that nothing can break and that many people find their delight and their peace in the circle of their families. But it is also true that sometimes a man’s nearest and dearest are the people who understand him least, and that he finds his true fellowship with those who work for a common ideal and who share a common experience. This certainly is true – even if Christians find that those who should be closest to them are those who are most out of sympathy with them, there remains for them the fellowship of Jesus Christ and the friendship of all who love the Lord.”

Barclay says that this expanded notion of family – of home – is founded on three things:

1. A common ideal. People who are very different can be firm friends, if they have a common ideal for which they work and toward which they press
2. A common experience and the memories that come from it. When people have passed together through some great experience – and when they can together look back on it – real friendship begins
3. Obedience. There is no better way of showing the reality of love than the spirit of obedience.

In a conference to the Visitation Sisters, Francis remarked:

“Let us hear and follow the voice of the divine Savior, who like the perfect psalmist, pours forth the last strains of an undying love from the tree of the cross, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ After that has been said, what remains but to breathe forth our last breath and die of love, living no longer for ourselves but Jesus living in us? Then, all the anxieties of our hearts will cease – anxieties proceeding from desires suggested by self-love and by tenderness for ourselves that make us secretly so eager in the pursuit of our own satisfaction...Embarked, then, in the exercises of our own vocation and carried along by the winds of this simple and loving confidence we shall make the greatest progress; we shall draw nearer and nearer to home.” (Living Jesus, p. 430)

As members of Jesus’ family let us do our level best to be obedient, that is, to listen to the voice of God in our lives and act upon what we hear. May we celebrate the kinship, friendship and love that come with following the will of our heavenly Father and experience the ties that truly and tenaciously bind us together.

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(July 20, 2016: Apollinaris, Bishop and Martyr)

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“Some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit...”

In a letter to the Duc de Bellegarde, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Persevere in this great courage and determination which keeps you lifted high above temporal things. Keep your eyes fixed steadfastly on that blissful day of eternity towards which the course of years bears us on. As these pass they themselves pass by us stage after stage until we reach the end of the road. But in the meantime, in each passing moment there lies enclosed as in a tiny kernel the seed of all eternity, and in our humble little

works of devotion there lies hidden the prize of everlasting glory...” (TLG, Book XI, Chapter 6, Chapter 29, p. 212)

Regardless of how large or small the yield of the seeds that God has planted deep within you, there is only one place in which you will find those seeds – today.

In each and every present moment!

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Spirituality Matters 2016: July 21st - July 27th

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(July 21, 2016: Lawrence of Brindisi, Priest and Doctor of the Church)

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“To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away...”

William Barclay made the following observation about this Gospel passage:

“Many a person in childhood and schooldays had a smattering of Latin or French or of some other language, and in later life lose every word because he never made any attempt to develop or use them. Many a person had some skill in a craft or game and lost it because he neglected it. The diligent and hard-working person is in a position to be given more and more; the lazy person may well lose even what he has. Any gift can be developed; and since nothing in life stands still, if a gift is not developed, it is lost.”

“So it is with goodness. Every temptation we conquer makes us more able to conquer the next and every temptation to which we fall makes us less able to withstand the next attack. Every good thing we do, every act of self-discipline and of service, makes us better prepared for the next opportunity, and every time we fail to use such an opportunity we make ourselves less able to seize the next when it comes. Life is always a process of gaining more or losing more. Jesus laid down the truth that the nearer a person lives to Him, the nearer to the Christian ideal that person will grow. By contrast, the more a person drifts away from Christ, the less he or she is able to grow in goodness; for weakness, like strength, is an increasing practice.” (Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, p. 67)

St. Francis de Sales put it this way: if we are not moving forward in the practice of virtue, we are falling behind. So it is with a life of devotion: making the effort to do good produces its own reward by expanding our experience of life, whereas neglecting to do good is its own punishment by diminishing our experience of life.

Today, take an inventory of the gifts - and the life - that God has given you. What do you find - growth or decline?

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(July 22, 2016: Mary Magdalene)

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“She saw Jesus there, but did not know it was Jesus.”

In a letter to Marie Bourgeois Brulart, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Mary Magdalene is looking for Our Lord and it is he whom she holds. She is asking him, and it is he whom she asks. She could not see him as she had hoped to see him. This is why she did not recognize him as he actually was and continues to see him in another guise. She wanted to see him in his robes of glory and not in the lowly clothes of a gardener. But in the end she recognized him when he spoke to her by name: ‘Mary.’”

“You see, Our Lord meets you every day dressed as a gardener in any number of places and situations...Be of good cheer, and let nothing dismay you.” (Selected Letters, Stopp, p. 136)

On any given day God may be, as it were, standing right in front of us, hidden in plain sight. However, it isn't a case of a God who is trying to hide from us! Rather, it is our desire to see God in ways that match our preferences, and that, consequently, prevent us from seeing God as and where He really is, especially when it comes to recognizing how God is present in us and in one another!

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(July 23, 2016: Bridget, Religious)

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“Let them grow together until harvest...”

In the garden of our lives all of us can find both wheat and weeds. It's really tempting to focus our energy and attention on identifying and removing the weeds, but we do this at the risk of unintentionally removing the wheat as well. Jesus suggests that it is far better to be comfortable with the fact that we have both wheat and weeds in our lives and to allow God to sort them out over time.

Francis de Sales clearly grasped the wisdom of Jesus' advice. In a letter to Madame de la Flechere, he wrote:

“Don't be examining yourself to see if what you are doing is little or great, good or bad, provided that it is not sinful and that, in all good faith, you are trying to do it for God. As much as possible do well what you have to do, and once it is done, think no more about it but turn your attention to what has to be done next. Walk very simply along the way our Lord shows you and don't worry. We must hate our faults, but we should do so calmly and peacefully, without fuss or anxiety. We must be patient at the sight of these faults and learn from the humiliation that they bring about. Unless you do this, your imperfections, of which you are acutely conscious, will disturb you even more and thus grow stronger, for nothing is more favorable to the growth of these 'weeds' than our anxiety and overeagerness to get rid of them.” (Letters of Spiritual Direction, pp. 161-162)

What's the bottom line? God loves us just the way we are - weeds and all. Who are we to suggest that God will love us more without them?

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(July 24, 2016: Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“I must see whether or not their actions fully correspond to the cry against them. I mean to find out.”

Today's Scriptures show us that God's judgment is both righteous and compassionate.

The Book of Genesis describes God's outrage over the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah. However, before taking any action, God intends to personally determine whether or not the outcry has a basis in fact.

God's judgment is never rash.

St. Francis de Sales says in his Introduction to the Devout Life: "How offensive to God is rash judgment. It is a kind of spiritual jaundice that causes all things to appear evil to the eyes of those infected with it." (IDL, Part 3, Chapter 28)

Rash judgments have far less to do with the behaviors of our neighbor and a great deal more to do with the machinations and moods of our own hearts. Rash judgments are signs of the presence of arrogance, self-satisfaction, fear, bitterness, jealousy, hatred, envy, ambition and condescension within the person whose judgments are rash.

Rash judgments seldom deal with facts. Rash judgments are founded upon appearance, impression, hearsay and gossip. Rash judgments are made in an instant (hence the term "snap" judgments), based not on reason, but on emotion.

Rash judgments do not promote reconciliation and peace; rather, rash judgments produce division and injustice. Francis de Sales wrote: "Rash judgments draw a conclusion from an action in order to condemn the other person." (Ibid)

Finally, rash judgments seldom - if ever - result in compassionate action.

Francis de Sales wrote: "Whoever wants to be cured (of making rash judgments) must apply remedies, not to the eyes or intellect, but to the affections. If your affections are kind, your judgments will be likewise." (Ibid)

To be like God - to live like Jesus - to be instruments of the Holy Spirit - requires that our judgments of one another be righteous:

- based in fact, not fiction
- rooted in sense, not suspicion
- focused on behavior, not bias

Divine judgment is always consumed with truth, committed to justice, and characterized by compassion.

Today, consider how do our judgments stack up?

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(July 25, 2016: James, Apostle)

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"We hold this treasure in earthen vessels..."

Francis de Sales once wrote:

“‘Borrow empty vessels, not a few,’ said Elisha to the poor widow, ‘ and pour oil into them.’ (2 Kings 4: 3-4) To receive the grace of God into our hearts they must be emptied of our own pride...” (Living Jesus, p. 149)

It's all-too-easy to fill our hearts – our precious earthen vessels – with all kinds of earthly treasures, things that – as good as they might be – aren't really treasures at all - at least, not where God is concerned. The less space occupied in our hearts by things that merely pass for treasure, the more room we make available in our hearts for the real, heavenly treasure that is truly precious: the love of God. Recall the words of St. Francis de Sales in a conference (On Cordiality) he gave to the Sisters of the Visitation: [“We must remember that love has its seat in the heart, and that we can never love our neighbor too much, nor exceed the limits of reason in this affection, provided that it dwells in the heart.”](#) ([Conference IV](#), p. 56)

The story of Zebedee's sons illustrates the importance of being very careful about what we store in our hearts. Notwithstanding their intimate relationship with Jesus, they set their hearts on a treasure that was not in Jesus' power to grant: places of honor in His Kingdom. He responds to this request (made on James and John's behalf by their mother, no less, who apparently also had her heart set on honor for her sons as well) by challenging them to set their hearts not on the desire for honor but for opportunities to serve the needs of others...and so to have honor beyond their wildest dreams!

We do hold a treasure - God's love - in the earthly vessels of our hearts. Let's be careful about what we pour into them. The more room we make in our hearts for God's treasure, the richer we shall be.

And the more we will have to share with others!

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(July 26, 2016: Joachim and Anne)

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“Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field...”

Some weeks ago we touched upon the images of wheat and weeds. There is something of both wheat and weeds inside each and every one of us. Careful examination of the interior gardens of our thoughts, feelings and attitudes reveals things which promote life; likewise, in those same gardens we can identify things that compete with life.

In a letter to Madame de la Flechere, Francis de Sales wrote:

[“Don't be examining yourself to see if what you are doing is little or much, good or bad, provided that it is not sinful and that, in all good faith, you are trying to do it for God. As much as possible, do well that you have to do, and once it is done, think no more about it but turn your attention to what has to be done next. Walk simply along the way our Lord shows you and don't worry. We must hate our faults, but we should do so calmly and peacefully, without fuss or anxiety. We must be patient at the sight of these faults and learn from the humiliation which they bring about. Unless you do this, your imperfections – of which you are acutely conscious – will disturb you even more and thus grow stronger, for nothing is more favorable to the growth of these ‘weeds’ than our anxiety and over eagerness to rid ourselves of them.”](#) ([Letters of Spiritual Direction](#), pp. 161-162)

1. In each of us we find a mixture of both wheat and weeds. In each of us we find a mixed bag of both good and bad. Essentially, the Salesian tradition challenges us to deal with this reality in three ways. First, detest the weeds within us.
2. Second, don't dwell on those weeds within us.
3. Third, focus on – and nourish – the wheat within us.

These thoughts should pretty much explain the parable of the weeds – and for that matter, the wheat – don't you think?

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(July 27, 2016: Wednesday, Seventeenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure; like searching for fine pearls.”

A traditional way of explaining these images in today’s Gospel is to place the emphasis on us. This perspective considers this Gospel as a challenge to the hearer to “trade up”, that is, to give up those things we most value in order to obtain that which has the greatest value - the Kingdom of God.

A non-traditional way of explaining these images – and, apparently, the more accurate one – is to place the emphasis on God. It is God who is “trading up” for something better; it is God who is – as it were – cashing in all his chips for something even more valuable. What is that “treasure”? What are those “fine pearls”? We, yes we are the treasure that God pursues at any price. We are the pearls that God will leave no stone unturned to possess.

God “traded up” his only Son because He wanted to reclaim us. God ‘cashed in’ his only Son because He wanted to redeem us. God gave away everything He had in order to make us his own. In these acts God clearly displayed that it’s people, not things – like possessions, power or privilege – that God values the most.

Ignatius of Loyola is a great example of what happens when somebody discovers – or uncovers – a pearl of great price and value!. Before his conversion he was arrogant, vain about his appearance, defensive in matters of honor, and much more interested in attaining worldly glory than in growing in heavenly virtue. But following a long convalescence from a crippling battle wound that almost killed him, Ignatius traded up – he discovered that the Kingdom of God was vastly more important than any passing honor or achievement, and he acted accordingly.

We are God-given treasures! We are pearls bought at the highest of prices! Do we treat ourselves – and one another – accordingly?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: July 28th - August 3rd

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(July 28, 2016: Thursday, Seventeenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“The Kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind. When it is full they haul it ashore and sit down to put what is good into buckets. What is bad they throw away.”

What should I hold onto in life? What should I let go of in life? What’s good for me? What’s not good for me? These kinds of questions are the stuff of discernment. John Crossin, OSFS, offers for our consideration three aspects of any discernment process, that is, any attempt to determine God’s will.

Mind you, discernment is not an exact science. While we can come to know God’s Will in broad strokes – and sometimes even in the particular – we can’t presume to know it all. And sometimes, we may even get it wrong.

Still, some of the things that can help us to know what to keep and what to give away in life include:

- *God's Signified Will* – This will is the information we already have at our disposal from the Scriptures, Commandments, Counsels etc. These clearly communicate what God considers to be good, virtuous and life-giving values, attitudes and actions.
- *Feedback from Others* – We should make good use of the wise counsel of friends, clergy, mentors, counselors and other people whom we trust. True friends will know when to tell us what we want to hear, and when to tell us what we need to hear.
- *Flexibility* – Francis de Sales observed that while all the saints are recognized for their conformity to God's will, no two saints followed God's Will in exactly the same way. We need to remind ourselves that discernment is about what God wants us - not others - to do in any particular situation. Sometimes, this may require us to "think outside of the box" - we need to be open to change.

Today, life being what it is, we may catch all kinds of things in the nets of our lives. Some things are always good for us, while other things are always bad for us. However, there may be some things we catch that used to be good but no longer are. On the other hand, there may be other things once considered bad that may now actually be very good.

Decisions, decisions - What do I keep? I keep the things that promote the Kingdom of heaven! What do I throw away? I throw away the things that do not!

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(July 29, 2016: Martha)

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"You are anxious and worried about many things."

We are all-too familiar with this image from the Gospel according to Luke. All-too familiar because it is all-too-easy to see in this Gospel a putdown of action and activity as compared with prayer and contemplation.

Jesus does not criticize Martha for being busy about the details of hospitality. Rather, Jesus criticizes the fact that Martha is allowing her activity and expectations to make her anxious. Likewise, Mary is not exalted due to her inactivity, but rather because she is not burdened with anxiety. In short, Martha is upset and flustered, while Mary is calm and centered.

Both Martha and Mary bring something to the experience of hospitality. In Martha, we see the importance of tending to details when welcoming people into our homes. In Mary, we see the importance of welcoming people into our lives, into our hearts and into the core of whom we are without allowing the details to overwhelm us. Hospitality, then, isn't a matter of choosing between activity and availability. It is a matter of incorporating – and of integrating – both.

Francis de Sales certainly knew this truth when he described the two great faces of love: the love of [complacence](#) and the love of [benevolence](#). Complacence is love that delights in simply being in the presence of the beloved; benevolence is love that delights in expressing this complacence by doing for the beloved.

Doing and being. Being and doing. This is the dance of hospitality. This is the dance of love...a dance that challenges us to be as free as possible from anxious self-absorption, self-preoccupation and self-destruction.

In order to be truly open, to be truly welcoming, to be truly hospitable, there needs to be something of both Martha and Mary in each of us.

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(July 30, 2016: Peter Chrysologus, Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

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“The priests and the prophets said to the princes and to all the people, ‘This man deserves death...’”

Speaking of prophets being without honor in their native place, consider today’s selection from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. In a classic case of no good deed going unpunished, Jeremiah stirs up a hornet’s nest by being faithful to God’s will for him: to prophesy against his own house and his own city. While protesting his innocence, Jeremiah spends what may be his last breaths trying to convince the people to accept God’s word on its own merits rather than to bargain for his life. Having spoken his peace, Jeremiah decides to let the chips fall where they may.

Fortunately for him, the chips fell both God’s way and Jeremiah’s way!

In his [Introduction to the Devout Life](#), Francis de Sales observed: “We must not be too ardent, precise and demanding in regard to preserving our good name. Men who are overly tender and sensitive on this point are like people who take medicine for slight indispositions. Although they think they are preserving their health, they actually destroy it. In like manner those who try too carefully to maintain their reputation lose it entirely. Generally speaking, to ignore or despise an injury or calumny is a far more effective remedy than resentment, fighting and revenge. Crocodiles harm only those who are afraid of them and detraction hurts only those who are vexed by it. Excessive fear of losing our good name reveals great distrust in its foundation, which is living a good life. Towns that have wooden bridges over great rivers are afraid that they will be swept away by every little rise of water, but those with stone bridges fear only extraordinary floods. In like manner those with souls solidly grounded on virtue usually despise the floods let loose by harmful tongues...” ([IDL](#), Part III, Chapter 27, pp. 195-196)

Jeremiah faced not only the prospect of losing his reputation or credibility for speaking God’s word, but he also faced the possibility of losing his life for speaking God’s word. His response showed remarkable strength of character and purpose - a character that obviously convinced enough people to not only protect his life but also to preserve his reputation. His courage persuaded the people to accept his message as well.

Have you ever faced push-back from others for saying or doing the right thing? While your life may not have been at risk, how might your reputation among others suffered as a result of your decision to stand up for what it right? How did you deal – or are your dealing - with that experience?

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(July 31, 2016: Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“What profit comes to a person from all the toil and anxiety of heart with which one labored under the sun?”

Is wealth an obstacle to living a righteous life? Do possessions prevent us from living a righteous life? Must we choose between the things that are of earth and the things that are of heaven?

Indeed, riches may be a temptation to forsake a God-centered life precisely because they may distract us from pursuing the things that really matter in life - the things that will last forever. However, the root of the problem may not be the wealth - the possessions - the success - themselves, but rather, inordinate anxiety and concern about them.

Anxiety about the accumulation and preservation of wealth ultimately prevents us from truly enjoying our blessings and successes in life. As today's Scriptures point out, anxiety about holding on to how much (or even, how little) we possess can lead to tragic consequences.

Francis de Sales wrote in his Introduction to the Devout Life:

"There is a difference between possessing poison and being poisoned. Pharmacists keep almost every kind of poison in stock for use on various occasions, yet they are not themselves poisoned because it is merely in their shops, not in their bodies. So, too, you can possess riches without being poisoned by them if you keep them in your home, purse or wallet, but not in your heart." Part III, Chapter 14)

The man in the Gospel parable is not condemned because he had filled his barn with riches. No, he is condemned because he had allowed his heart to be consumed by riches. So consumed, in fact, that when he was considering how to dispose of his excessive good fortune, it never occurred to him that he might share it with others.

A word to the wealthy...and the wise: the best remedy for not being consumed with riches is to practice the virtue of generosity. After all, how can you be anxious about losing what you have if you are already too busy sharing it with - even giving it away to - others?

Therein lies the secret of true wealth...in the eyes of God, wealth that truly - and forever - enriches. What makes me rich is not a measure of what I possess. No, what makes me rich is what I am willing to share with others.

Why not begin today?

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(August 1, 2016: Alphonsus Liguori, Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

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"Give them something to eat yourselves."

The disciples were concerned about the welfare of the crowd that had followed Jesus to a remote place. It had been a long day. Evening was fast approaching and there was no place nearby for the people to get food or, for that matter, shelter. Fearful of the possible consequences, the disciples suggested to Jesus that he should send the crowd away.

On the face of it, this was a very reasonable suggestion. From a purely practical point of view, the disciples were fearful of the possible results of the people being stranded in a deserted place without provisions. All the more remarkable that instead of dismissing the crowd, Jesus said to the disciples: "Give them something to eat yourselves".

What possibly could have motivated Jesus to respond this way?

Consider the possibility that Jesus recognized a deeper level of fear in the disciples, a fear far more terrifying than the prospect of scores of men, women and children going without food or water. Perhaps the disciples

were afraid that the crowd would turn to them for help...or maybe even turn against them for failing to help. Faced with this overwhelming prospect, the disciples, in effect, decided to suggest to Jesus that sending folks away would fix the problem.

To be sure, there are some situations or circumstances in our own lives – and in the lives of those we love – that seem far beyond any time, talent or treasure that we might possess. As Clint Eastwood’s “Dirty Harry” character suggests, “A man’s got to know his limitations”. Faced with our own limitations it is wise, indeed, to turn to Jesus in times of need.

But this scene from Matthew’s Gospel challenges us to consider circumstances in which we are tempted to turn to God too quickly for answers without first considering how God may be asking us to act as instruments of life and love for others. To be sure, bringing peace to the Middle East is way beyond my singular abilities. Therefore, I pray to God for peace and pray for those who are working for that peace. But closer to home, how often do I expect God to feed the hungry without first considering how I might be called to offer myself as food and drink to others? How often do I ask God to heal a relationship without first making any effort on my own to be a source of healing? How many times in my life do I immediately expect God to fix the problem without ever considering how God may be asking me to be a part of the solution?

In short, living a life of devotion – following the example of Jesus – avoids two extremes – expecting God to do everything or expecting us to do everything. Life is about balance, about discernment, about accepting the situations in which when we depend on God to bring about something good, as well as recognizing the circumstances in which God is depending on us to make good things happen.

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(August 2, 2016: Tuesday, Eighteenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Take courage, do not be afraid...”

In a letter to St. Jane de Chantal, Francis de Sales wrote:

“The Scriptures tell us that St. Peter, seeing that the storm was raging, grew afraid; and as soon as he was afraid he began to sink and drown, so he cried out: ‘O Lord, save me!’ And our Lord caught hold of his hand and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’ Look at this holy apostle; he walks dry foot on the water, the waves and the winds could not make him sink, but fear of the wind and the waves will make him perish unless his master saves him. Fear is a greater evil than the evil itself.” (Stopp, Selected Letters, page 125, p. 198)

His advice to Saint Jane de Chantal is also great advice for us. He recommended:

“Do not be afraid. You are walking on the sea, surrounded by wind and water, but you are with Jesus: so what is there to fear? If terror seizes you, cry out loudly: O Lord, save me. He will stretch forth his hand towards you; clasp it tight and go joyfully on your way. In short, don’t philosophize about your trouble; don’t argue with it, just go straight on, quite simply. If the whole world is topsy-turvy – if all around is darkness and smoke and din – God is still with us.” (*Ibid*)

In there anything in particular that is weighing heavily on your mind or heart? Are there any issues or concerns that are attempting to paralyze you? Is there anything about which you find yourself afraid?

Remember: God is with you! Take his hand, clasp it tight and go joyfully on your way.

As bravely as you can.

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(August 3, 2016: Wednesday, Eighteenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“O woman, how great is your faith!”

Today’s Scripture readings offer us a study in contrast. In the Book of Numbers we see how the faith of the Israelites was shaken when they learned that the land of “milk and honey” promised by the Lord was already occupied by other people, and not just any other people – they were strong, fierce giants living in well-fortified towns. It would seem that the Israelites simply expected to inherit the Promised Land unopposed without any effort or resistance.

Contrast this situation with the faith demonstrated by the Canaanite woman in Matthew’s Gospel. Three times Jesus rebuffed her request to drive a demon out of her daughter. Undaunted, the woman continued to press Jesus to the point where he was not only impressed by her faith but also granted her request.

The Israelites teach us that having a strong faith in God’s Providence doesn’t mean that God’s promises will always be fulfilled easily. Many good things in life require hard, difficult work. For her part the Canaanite woman demonstrates that strong faith in God does not require passivity, but in fact, it often requires persistence and tenacity.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: August 4th - August 10th

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(August 4, 2016: John Vianney, Priest)

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“Create a clean heart in me, O God...”

In order to understand what it means to have a “pure” or “clean” heart, let’s look at the outside of a carton of Breyer’s Ice Cream. Somewhere in the vicinity of the mint leaf logo, you will find Breyer’s “Pledge of Purity.” This pledge states that as far as possible that this product is free of any and all things artificial. It is unadulterated. Put positively, the pledge assures the buyer that the contents are all natural.

To have a clean or pure heart means that I am trying my best to be a real, all-natural and authentic person. To have a clean or pure heart means that I am trying my best to rid my life of anything artificial, fake or phony. In other words, to have a clean or pure heart means that I am striving to be a person in whom there is no guile.

As we might say today, a person with a clean or pure heart is trying their level best to be a transparent person.

Francis de Sales believed that one of the most practical ways of striving for a clean, pure heart is how we speak to one another. In his Introduction to the Devout Life, he wrote:

“Your language should be restrained, frank, sincere, candid unaffected and honest. Be on guard against equivocation, ambiguity or dissimulation...as the sacred word tells us, the Holy Spirit does not dwell in a deceitful or tricky soul. No artifice is as good or desirable as honest, plain dealing. Worldly prudence and

carnal artifice belong to the children of this world, but the children of God walk a straight path and their hearts are without guile..." (IDL, Part III, Chapter 30, p. 206)

Strive to be a real, authentic and unadulterated person. Rid from your heart anything that prevents you from becoming that type of person - pretense, ambiguity, artificiality or deceit. Try your level best to be transparent, that is, to allow others to see the real and unadulterated you!

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(August 5, 2016: Friday, Eighteenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

In a conference to the Visitation Sisters on "Hope," Francis de Sales counseled:

"If divine Providence does not permit afflictions or mortifications to come upon you, then do not desire them or ask for them. On the other hand, if divine Providence permits afflictions or mortifications to come upon you, you must not refuse them but accept them courageously, lovingly and calmly." (Conference VI, P. 95)

Some crosses can be delayed but not denied. On any given day we would do well not to desire or ask for afflictions or mortifications, but if any afflictions or mortifications should come our way today, how will we accept – and deal with – them?

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(August 6, 2016: Transfiguration of the Lord)

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"He was transfigured before them..."

Something remarkable happened on that mountain.

Consider the possibility that it was not Jesus who changed, but rather, it was Peter, James and John who were transformed. Imagine that this account from Mark's Gospel documents the experience of Peter, James and John as if their eyes were opened and their vision widened, enabling them to see without impediment the virtually blinding light of Jesus' love that flowed from every fiber of his being.

Indeed, every day of Jesus' life something of that remarkable brilliance, that remarkable passion and that remarkable glory was revealed to people of all ages, stages and states of life. The shepherds and magi saw it; the elders in the temple saw it; the guests at a wedding saw it; a woman caught in adultery saw it; a boy possessed by demons saw it; a man born blind saw it; the good thief saw it.

If so many others could recognize it in a word, a glance or a touch, why might Peter, James and John have required such extra effort in helping them to see Jesus' glory? Perhaps it was because they were so close to Jesus; perhaps it was because they were with him every day; perhaps it was because, on some level, they had somehow taken his glory for granted.

What about us? Do we recognize that same divine glory present in us, present in others, present in creation, present in even the simplest and most ordinary, everyday experiences of justice, truth, healing, forgiveness, reconciliation and compassion?

Or do we take it for granted?

St. Francis de Sales saw the Transfiguration as a “glimpse of heaven.” How might our eyes, our minds and our hearts need to be transfigured and transformed in ways that enable us to catch this “glimpse of heaven” within us and around us? How might we need to see more clearly the glory of a God who always loves, redeems, heals, forgives, challenges, pursues., strengthens and inspires us?

Today, may we grow in our ability - through the quality of our lives - to make that “glimpse of heaven” more clearly visible and available to the eyes – and in the lives – of others.

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(August 7, 2016: Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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"Faith is confident assurance concerning those things for which we hope, and conviction about that which we do not see...Do not live in fear."

As followers of Jesus, we are called to live lives of faith. Each day, each hour, each moment of our lives should be faith-filled opportunities to grow in our love and knowledge of God, ourselves and one another.

Today's Scriptures beg the question: What, exactly, is faith?

St. Francis de Sales distinguished between faith that is living and faith that is dead:

"Examine your works and actions. It is when all signs of life cease that we consider a person to be dead. So it is with faith. While in winter living trees may resemble dead ones, in their season they produce leaves, flowers and fruit. In the same way, while dead faith may appear to be living faith, only the latter bears the fruit of faith in all seasons. Living faith is excellent because, being united to love and vivified by love, it is strong, firm and constant."

People who are faith-filled, Francis de Sales would suggest, are living vigilant, strong, prudent and attentive lives. They adhere to the truth that God is love, that they are created, redeemed and inspired in love and that they are called to share this love with others. Faith-filled people are people of action, courage and perseverance, always moving forward, even toward things they do not see.

Compare this power and promise with the alternative: the decision to live in fear.

Today's Scriptures beg the question: What, exactly, is fear? It is “a state or condition marked by feelings of agitation and anxiety caused by the presence or imminence of danger; a feeling of disquiet or apprehension”. (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language)

Those who live in fear do not trust the truth that God is love. They dare not believe that they are created and sustained in that love. They feel that they must not take the risk of sharing that love with others. People who live in fear are people of inaction, discouragement and timidity. They long to turn back; they fear to look forward. People of fear are, in a very real sense, already dead.

Make no mistake - people of faith are not immune to fear. They fear their own infidelity; they fear their own weakness; they fear their own sin. Sometimes, they likewise fear the infidelity, weakness and sin of others. But in the end, people of faith choose not to live in fear but to live in the truth of the person God is calling them to be, and the person that God is challenging them to be in the lives of their brothers and sisters.

People of faith are human beings who try their level best to be fully human. People of faith know that while fear is a part of life, there is more to life – much, much more - than fear!

Why not consider today – Are you a person of faith?

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(August 8, 2016: Dominic, Founder, Religious and Priest)

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“Heaven and earth are filled with your glory...”

However conscious of those words that we may or may not be, when we hear these words, “Heaven and earth are filled with your glory,” we might say to ourselves, “But, of course!” when it applies to heaven. But by contrast, when it applies to earth, many of us might simply whisper to ourselves, “If you say so”.

Whether we recognize it or not, God’s glory is not only found in heaven, but also - to those who have eyes of faith - God’s glory abounds on earth, too.

In her book Earth Crammed with Heaven, Elizabeth Dreyer writes:

“For all the moving and high-flying ideas connected with the spiritual life, there is something down-to-earth and practical about it. God often meets us in a kind gesture in hard times, in a child’s joy, a word of wisdom from a Catherine of Siena or a Julian of Norwich, in a peaceful death – these are the simple but profound moments that reveal the truth and authenticity of one’s life with God. It is here – on this earth – that things come together as we experience the total fabric of our lives and discover that it is indeed “of a piece.”(p. 32)

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“When the entire universe was made, God’s meditation was changed, as it were, into contemplation. God looked at all the goodness in his works with one single glance and saw, as Moses says, ‘all the things he had made, and they were very good.’ The different parts, when considered separately by way of meditation were good, but when looked upon with a single glance - all of them being taken together by means of contemplation - they were found to be very good.” (TLG, Book VI, Chapter 5, p. 282)

Whether in heaven or on earth, God’s glory – as with beauty – is in the eye of the beholder. It’s already here, but perhaps, hidden in plain sight.

Can you see it?

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(August 9, 2016: Tuesday, Nineteenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“Son of man, he then said to me, feed your belly and fill your stomach with this scroll I am giving you. I ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth...”

Francis de Sales opened his preface to the *Spiritual Directory* by drawing on these same verses above from the book of the prophet Ezekiel. In addition, Francis included the following words below:

“This book will prove bitter to your interior, for it will lead to the perfect mortification of your self-love. It will, on the other hand, be sweeter than honey in your mouth, because there is no consolation equal to that of mortifying our self-love in order to let live and reign in us the love of him who dies for love of us. In this way your bitterness will be transformed into the sweetness of a perfect peace, and you will be filled with true happiness.

Mortification of our self-love, self-absorption and self centeredness? Sure, it’s tough. Yes, it can be distasteful. But how can this even come close to the sweetness that comes from becoming the people that God created us to be – images and likenesses of his only Son and our savior?

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(August 10, 2016: Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr)

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“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”

“A well-known legend has persisted from earliest times. As deacon in Rome, Lawrence was charged with the responsibility for the material goods of the church and the distribution of alms to the poor. When Lawrence knew he would be arrested like the pope, he sought out the poor, widows and orphans of Rome and gave them all the money he had on hand, selling even the sacred vessels to increase the sum. When the prefect of Rome heard of this, he imagined that the Christians must have considerable treasure. He sent for Lawrence and said, “You Christians say we are cruel to you, but that is not what I have in mind. I am told that your priests offer in gold, that the sacred blood is received in silver cups, that you have golden candlesticks at your evening services. Now, your doctrine says you must render to Caesar what is his. Bring these treasures—the emperor needs them to maintain his forces. God does not cause money to be counted: He brought none of it into the world with him—only words. Give me the money, therefore, and be rich in words.”

“Lawrence replied that the church was indeed rich. ‘I will show you a valuable part. But give me time to set everything in order and make an inventory.’ After three days he gathered a great number of blind, lame, maimed, leprous, orphaned and widowed persons and put them in rows. When the prefect arrived, Lawrence simply said, ‘These are the treasure of the church.’”

“The prefect was so angry he told Lawrence that he would indeed have his wish to die—but it would be by inches. He had a great gridiron prepared, with coals beneath it, and had Lawrence’s body placed on it. After the martyr had suffered the pain for a long time, the legend concludes, he made his famous cheerful remark, ‘It is well done. Turn me over!’” (<http://www.americancatholic.org/Features/Saints/saint.aspx?id=1103>)

When it comes to sowing bountifully, it doesn’t get much greater than martyrdom. And while most of us may never be called upon to make this ultimate expression of generosity, we can nevertheless sow bountifully each and every day by doing good things in simple, small and ordinary ways...for and with one another.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: August 11th - August 17th

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(August 11: Clare, Religious and Virgin)

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"You live in the midst of a rebellious house..."

Maximilian Kolbe once wrote:

"No one in the world can change Truth. What we can do and should do is to seek truth and to serve it when we have found it. The real conflict is the inner conflict. Beyond armies of occupation and the hetacombs of extermination camps, there are two irreconcilable enemies in the depth of every soul: good and evil, sin and love. And what use are the victories on the battlefield if we are ourselves are defeated in our innermost personal selves?" (<http://catholicfire.blogspot.com/2006/08/favorite-quotes-from-st-maximilian.html>)

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

"Love of God and self-love are in our heart like Jacob and Esau in Rebecca's womb: they have great antipathy and opposition to one another and continually struggle within our hearts... We must have courage, hoping in the words of our Lord, who promises even as he gives commands, and commands even as he promises victory for his love. He seems to say to the soul what he caused to be said to Rebecca: 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be divided out of your body, and one people shall overcome the other.'" (TLG, Book XI, Chapter 20, pp. 254-255)

We know about this struggle ourselves. Why do we do the evil that we shouldn't? Why do we fail to do the good that we should? What will come of this struggle between good and evil in us? Recall the words of the Cherokee legend:

An elderly Cherokee Native American was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, "A fight is going on inside me, it is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf is evil -- he is fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, competition, superiority, and ego. The other is good---he is joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too." They thought about it for a minute and then one child asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied: "The one you feed".

Today, which wolf in your house will you feed?

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(August 12, 2016: Jane Frances de Chantal, Wife, Mother, Religious and Founder)

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~ Proper of Readings ~

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy (16: 3-9)

Hear then, Israel, and be careful to observe them,
that you may grow and prosper the more, in keeping
with the promise of the LORD, the God of your
fathers, to give you a land flowing with milk and honey.

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD
alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God,
with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.
Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today.

Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.

Word of the Lord.

Responsorial Psalm

(R) Happy those who take refuge in the Lord.

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall ever be in my mouth. Let my soul glory in the Lord; the lowly will hear me and be glad.

(R) Happy those who take refuge in the Lord.

Glorify the Lord with me; let us together extol his name. Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame.

(R) Happy those who take refuge in the Lord.

Taste and see how good the Lord is; happy the man who takes refuge in him. Come children, hear me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

(R) Happy those who take refuge in the Lord.

Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile; turn from evil and do good; seek peace and follow after it.

(R) Happy those who take refuge in the Lord.

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A reading from the first Letter of Peter (4: 7-11)

The end of all things is at hand. Therefore, be serious and sober for prayers. Above all, let your love for one another be intense, because love covers a multitude of sins.

Be hospitable to one another without complaining. As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace.

Whoever preaches, let it be with the words of God; whoever serves, let it be with the strength that God supplies, so that in all things God may be glorified

through Jesus Christ, to whom belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Word of the Lord.

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Gospel Acclamation

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who humble themselves like this child are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

+ A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew (13: 44-46)

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.

Gospel of the Lord.

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In the Introduction to the book, Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction, we read:

“Jane de Chantal continued with her work of overseeing the large family of religious to whom she was the chief spiritual mother. She wrote ardent letters to superiors, novice-mistresses and novices which reflect her struggle to institute a way in which the authentic Salesian spirit might come to be observed everywhere.”

“In her letters of spiritual direction (where her concern was to stay close to the very Salesian spirit of beginning right where one is and with the facts at hand, Jane de Chantal continued to show herself as a masterful director of souls. She brought to this task her won particular life-experience and temperament. The experience of motherhood was chief among those experiences. Since her youth she had been engaged in the art of biological mothering, and since midlife she had exercised her spiritual maternity. The correspondence she maintained with the superiors of the Visitation reflects a self-conscious cultivation of attitudes and skills she believed were congruent with maternal care. Superiors were enjoined to be true mothers, tolerant of their children’s weaknesses, encouraging their small steps, never overly ambitious for their advancement until they themselves grew into the maturity of spiritual wisdom... This task of cultivating and disseminating this spirit of motherly direction occupied Jane de Chantal for many years. It was part of her long-term effort to ensure the survival –

both institutional and spiritual – of the Salesian charism in its manifestation as the order of the Visitation.” (LSD, p. 32)

The selection from the Book of Deuteronomy underscores the importance of having a legacy – of making intentional efforts at passing on our hard-earned learning and wisdom to those with whom we live and work today, as well as to those who will follow in our footsteps tomorrow. Jane de Chantal shows us a sure and certain method for accomplishing this goal, namely:

- Beginning right where we are with the facts at hand
- Nurturing others
- Tolerating others’ weaknesses
- Encouraging small steps
- Allowing others to experience spiritual maturity at their own pace.

We are the beneficiaries of Jane de Chantal’s efforts to ensure the survival of the Salesian charism.

How can we pick up where she left off - just today?

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(August 13, 2016: Saturday, Nineteenth Week in Ordinary Time)

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“If a man is virtuous he shall surely live...”

Practicing virtue – that is, developing the habit of doing what is good – is the ultimate expression of any authentic spirituality. In the Salesian tradition, it isn’t enough to do what is good, but one also has to do what is good in ways that fit the state and stage of life in which one finds oneself.

In her book Earth Crammed with Heaven, Elizabeth Dreyer wrote:

“Francis de Sales stands out as one who was firmly convinced that people in every walk of life are called to holiness. His life’s effort, truly innovative in his day, was to help people find God in their particular life calling. The nearness of God was not the exclusive domain of any one group in the church. ‘True devotion,’ he said, ‘adorns and beautifies any vocation or employment.’ He constantly opposed the tendency, frequently found among those who want to live a spiritual; life, to seek the virtues of another state in life while neglecting those proper to one’s vocation. The home is not a convent and the virtues of the monastic life are not lived in the same way in family life...” (p. 46)

We will truly live to the extent that we practice virtue. We will truly live life to the full to the extent that we practice the virtues proper to the events, circumstances and relationships that we experience day in and day out.

Today, hat virtues might God be calling you to practice?

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(August 14, 2016: Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth? I assure you, the contrary is true: I have come for division.”

This is a hard saying that we hear from Jesus in today's Gospel. However, when we stop to consider our own experience of trying to faithfully live the Gospel, we realize that it is not merely a hard saying, but that it is also a hard truth.

Generally speaking, we experience this "division" in two ways.

First, our attempts to follow Jesus may produce division within ourselves. While our attempts to practice a life of devotion – as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews might say, to “lay aside every encumbrance of sin which clings to us and persevere in running the race which lies ahead” - should be its own reward. On the contrary, it also brings its own share of struggles. Our daily effort to turn away from sin and to pursue a life of virtue is imperfect at best. Who of us cannot relate to St. Peter's confession of his failures to do what he should do and his apparent inability to refrain from doing things that he should not do? Many of us experience the spiritual life as a form of the game “Chutes and Ladders” wherein our virtues are hard-fought and our vices come all too easily.

Francis de Sales knew of this experience all too well. He wrote: “It may well turn out that this change in your life will cause you many problems. While you have bid a great, general farewell to the follies and vanities of the world, your decision brings on a feeling of sadness and discouragement.” (Introduction, Part IV, Chapter 2)

Second, our attempts to follow Jesus may produce division within our relationships with others. While doing what is right should be its own reward, we also know that sometimes “no good deed goes unpunished.” Francis de Sales observed: “As soon as worldly people see that you wish to follow a devout life they aim a thousand darts of mockery and even detraction at you. The most malicious of them will slander your conversion as hypocrisy, bigotry and trickery. They will say that the world has turned against you and, being rebuffed by it, you have turned to God. Your friends may raise a host of objections which they consider very prudent and reasonable. They will tell you that you will become depressed, grow old before your time and that your affairs at home will suffer. They will say that you can save your soul without going to such extremes, and a thousand similar trivialities.” (Introduction, Part IV, Chapter 1)

Ironically, it is only in the midst of these experiences of division (both within ourselves and with others) that are sometimes part and parcel of our attempts at pursuing lives of devotion that we can have any hope of finding true peace: the peace that comes from our patient perseverance at being faithful to whom God calls us to be, regardless of how the voices within us and around us may try to dissuade us from our quest. Our experiences of the troubles that come with doing the right thing – living the right way – remind us of yet another hard truth.

Peace has its price.

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(August 15, 2016: Assumption of the blessed Virgin Mary)

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“Blessed are you among women ...”

Our Salesian reflection for this Feast Day – the Assumption – comes entirely from Francis de Sales' Treatise on the Love of God, Book 7, Chapter 14.

“I do not deny that the soul of the most Blessed Virgin had two portions, and therefore two appetites, one according to the spirit and superior reason, and the other according to sense and inferior reason, with the result that she could experience the struggle and contradiction of one appetite against the other. This burden was felt even by her Son. I say that in this heavenly Mother all affections were so well arranged and ordered that love

of God held empire and dominion most peaceably without being troubled by diversity of wills and appetites or by contradiction of senses. Neither repugnance of natural appetite nor sensual movements ever went as far as sin, not even as far as venial sin. On the contrary, all was used holily and faithfully in the service of the holy love for the exercise of the other virtues which, for the most part, cannot be practiced except amid difficulty, opposition and contradiction...

“As everyone knows, the magnet naturally draws iron towards itself by some power both secret and very wonderful. However, there are five things that hinder this operation: (1) if there is too great a distance between magnet and iron; (2) if there is a diamond placed between the two; (3) if the iron is greased; (4) if the iron is rubbed with onion; (5) if the iron is too heavy.”

“Our heart is made for God, and God constantly entices it and never ceases to cast before it the allurements of divine love. Yet five things impede the operation of this holy attraction: (1) sin, which removes us from God; (2) affection for riches; (3) sensual pleasures; (4) pride and vanity; (5) self-love, together with the multitude of disordered passions it brings forth, which are like a heavy load wearing it down.”

“None of these hindrances had a place in the heart of the glorious Virgin. She was: (1) forever preserved from all sin; (2) forever most poor in spirit; (3) forever most pure; (4) forever most humble; (5) forever the peaceful mistress of all her passions and completely exempt from the rebellion that self-love wages against love of God. For this reason, just as the iron, if free from all obstacles and even from its own weight, would be powerfully yet gently drawn with steady attraction by the magnet – although in such wise that the attraction would always be more active and stronger according as they came closer together and their motion approached its end – so, too, the most Blessed Mother, since there is nothing in her to impede the operation of her Son’s divine love, was united with him in an incomparable union by gentle ecstasies without trouble or travail.”

“They were ecstasies in which the sensible part did not cease to perform its actions but without in any way disturbing the spiritual union, just as, in turn, perfect application of the spirit did not cause any great distraction to the senses. Hence, the Virgin’s death was the most gentle that can be imagined, for her Son sweetly drew her after the odor of his perfumes and she most lovingly flowed out after their sacred sweetness even to the bosom of her Son’s goodness. Although this holy soul had supreme love for her own most holy, most pure, and most lovable body, yet she forsook it without any pain or resistance... At the foot of the cross love had given to this divine spouse the supreme sorrows of death. Truly, then, it was reasonable that in the end death would give her the supreme delights of love.”

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(August 16, 2016: Stephen of Hungary)

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“It will be hard for one who is rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Riches themselves are not the greatest obstacle to our entering into the Kingdom of God. From a Salesian perspective, it is our desire for riches that poses the problem - the grandeur with which we protect them and the passion with which we pursue them.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales observed:

“Your heart must be open to heaven alone and impervious to riches and all other transitory things. Whatever part of them you may possess, you must keep your heart free from too strong an affection for them. Always keep your heart above riches: even when your heart is surrounded by riches, see to it that your heart remains distinct from them and master over them. Do not allow your heavenly spirit to become captive to earthly things. Let your heart remain always superior to riches and over them – not in them... I willingly grant that you

may take care to increase your wealth and resources, provided this is done not only justly but also properly and charitably.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 14, p. 163)

How can we determine if our possessions might be holding us back from the Kingdom of Heaven? Francis wrote:

“If you find your heart very desolated and devastated at the loss of anything you possess then believe me when I tell you that you love it too much. The strongest proof of how deeply we are attached to possessions is the degree of suffering we experience when we lose it.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 14, p. 164)

Are we experiencing any difficulties entering into the Kingdom of Heaven during our journeys here on earth? Perhaps, it is because our possessions have somehow managed to possess us!

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(August 17, 2016: Wednesday, Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“Are you envious because I am generous?”

The parable in today’s Gospel certainly suggests that those who labored the longest surely were envious! They felt cheated, because as we are told, they “grumbled” when they realized that the landowner had paid them the same amount as those who had barely worked a few hours!

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales counseled:

“We must be most careful not to spend much time wondering why God bestows a grace upon one person rather than another, or why God makes his favors abound on behalf of one rather than another. No, never give in to such musings. Since each of us has a sufficient – rather, an abundant measure of all things required for salvation – who in all the world can rightly complain if it pleases God to bestow his graces more largely on some than on others?” (Living Jesus, 0618, p. 246)

Of course, given how merciful and generous God is to us we would never be envious or complain about somebody else having more than we do!

Would we?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: August 18th - August 24th

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(August 18, 2016: Thursday, Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“I will give you a new heart...taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts.”

When you ask people, “What is the worst thing that can happen to a human heart?” many will instinctively or impulsively answer: “When it breaks”. As the reading from the Book of the prophet Ezekiel suggests, a broken

heart doesn't come anywhere close to the truly worst thing that can happen to the human heart - when it becomes hardened.

How does a heart become hardened? People don't generally wake up one morning and just decide to harden their hearts all at once, do they? In truth, most hearts become hardened slowly, insidiously and perhaps even silently over a long period of time.

Picture this image: what do nearly all small children do when they visit the beach for the first time? Almost instinctively (to the horror of their young parents!) they run fearlessly straight for the surf. Sure, they get knocked down. Sure, they get sand in places it doesn't belong. Sure, there are the occasional tears and sobs associated with encountering the force of the ocean. But invariably, once they've recovered, most children can't wait to return to where the action is - they learn not to allow the occasional hurt to deter them from happiness.

Not so for others. For some children the day at the beach may begin a slow process from which they never recover. They learn to fear not only the ebb and flow of the surf but the ebb and flow of life itself. Knocked down one-too-many times, they gradually stop going into the water. Over time, they stop going to the beach. Over a lifetime they stop going anywhere near where the action is: they learn to play it safe so as not to get hurt ever again!

St. Francis de Sales reminds us that we are born to love. That's why we're here - that's what we're all about - that's where the action is. As with beachgoers in the roaring surf, love is fraught with risks. We sometimes get knocked down and around in our pursuit of love. We sometimes get embarrassed. We sometimes get hurt and we sometimes even feel like we're drowning.

In the ups and downs of life – and love – resist the temptation to harden your heart. Resist the temptation to play it safe. Resist the temptation to avoid where the action is. Keep your heart open. Keep your heart trusting. Keep your heart human and keep your heart the way God intended – and created it – to be.

If you choose to love on the beach of life – if you allow your heart to wade into the waves, the surf and the riptides of everyday relationships - your heart will be broken. Speaking for myself, I'll take a broken heart over a hardened one any day.

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(August 19, 2016: John Eudes, Priest)

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“Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

The question put to Jesus in today's Gospel is not an exercise of “Trivial Pursuit.” This question is not mere rhetoric. Ultimately, it is a question of life and death. Jesus' answer is direct and to the point: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

And when he describes the second as “like” the first, Jesus is saying that the two commandments are essentially one in the same.

In a letter to Madame Brulart, Francis de Sales wrote:

“We must consider our neighbors n God who wishes us to love and cherish them must exercise this love of our neighbor, making our affection manifest by our actions. Although we may sometimes feel that this runs against the grain, we must not give up our efforts on that account. We ought to bring our prayers and meditations to focus on this point, for, after having asked for the love of God, we must likewise ask for the love of our neighbor.” (Living Jesus, 0618, p. 246)

Today, how can we put these two great commandments into practice?

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(August 20, 2016: Bernard, Abbot and Doctor of the Church)

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“Do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you...”

But do not follow their example. Jesus’ criticism, of course, is directed at the scribes and the Pharisees. There is good news and bad news about these religious contemporaries of Jesus. The good news? They excelled at telling other people how to live a virtuous life! The bad news? They failed to practice what they preached.

In other words, they lived life by a double standard. As Francis de sales once described, they had two hearts:

“A mild, gracious and courteous attitude toward themselves and another that was hard, severe and rigorous toward their neighbors. They had two weights: one to weight goods to their own greatest possible advantage and another to weight their neighbors to their greatest disadvantage.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 36, p. 216)

To make matters even worse, not only did the scribes and Pharisees weigh one weight to their neighbors’ greatest disadvantage, but they also laid heavy burdens on others – hard to carry – without lifting even so much as a finger to help carry them.

Francis de Sales’ condemnation of living life by a double standard is short but not very sweet: “To have two weights – one heavier with which to receive and the other lighter with which to dispense – ‘is an abominable thing to the Lord.’” (*Ibid*)

Today, do you want to be the greatest among others in the sight of God? Then live *not* by two standards, but by one: God’s standard. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, try your level best this day to treat others as you would want them to treat you. Let others see in you someone who not only talks the talk but who walks the walk.

The talk – and walk – of love.

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(August 21, 2016: Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“Go out to all the world and tell the good news.”

Pope Paul VI defined evangelization as "bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new."

In their book entitled Creating the Evangelizing Parish, Paulist Fathers Frank DeSiano and Kenneth Boyack challenge us to accept this simple truth: each of us is called to be an evangelist, to “go out to all the world and

tell the Good News,” and to give witness to the power and promise of God's redeeming love in our lives. (Paulist Press, 1993)

While the good news is essentially the same, the authors insist that the manner and method in which each of us evangelizes must be rooted in the state and stage of life in which we find ourselves. For a deeper understanding of what this means, they turn to our old friend and companion, St. Francis de Sales:

“St. Francis de Sales wrote a marvelous book entitled The Introduction to the Devout Life. In it he makes the simple yet profound point that a follower (a disciple) of Jesus should look at his or her situation in life and then live a Christian life accordingly. A wife and mother will find holiness in the way she lives in relation to her husband, and in taking care of the family. She could hardly leave her family many times each day, like monks or nuns, to attend Liturgy of the Hours...Her spirituality, her way of following Christ is determined by her vocation and lifestyle...and if she works, living out her vocation as a married woman bearing witness to Christ in the workplace.”

We are made in the image and likeness of God. We are redeemed by the life, love, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are inspired and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. This acclamation is indeed Good News! This Good News should make a difference in our lives and in the lives of those with whom we love, live, work, pray and play. This Good News should transform and renew us. Through us, this Good News offers the possibility of transformation and renewal to others.

How we share this Good News -- how we evangelize -- depends on the person we are, where we are and how we are. How we share this Good News must match the state, stage, circumstances, responsibilities, routines and relationships in which we find ourselves each day. Following Jesus is not about forsaking our ordinary lives. No, it is about making real the life and love of God in our thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions.

Evangelization has a lot to do with what we say. After all, it is about “telling” something, which in this case, is the Good News of God. However, evangelization also has a lot to do (perhaps even more) with what we do. What we say is a convincing sign of God's love only insofar as it is congruent with how we relate to one another.

By all means - by any means – “go out to all the world and tell the Good News” of God's love, God's forgiveness, God's justice and God's peace. But most especially, do it in the places - with the people - where you live, work, pray and play every day.

And why not begin today?

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(August 22, 2016: Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

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“May God make you worthy of his calling and powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose...”

In a letter to Jane de Chantal, Francis de sales wrote:

“I have been praying just now, and on asking myself why we have come into this world, I understood that we are here only to receive and to carry our sweet Jesus: on our tongue, in telling people about him; in our arms, in doing good works; on our shoulders, in carrying his yoke...O blessed are they who carry Him gently and with constancy!” (Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 168)

In the fullness of her humanity, who better than Mary embodies this way of carrying Jesus and sharing Jesus with others? In her saying “Yes” to being the Mother of God, Mary embodies the fullness of the two greatest commandments. She agrees to be the mother of the Messiah out of her love both for God and also for neighbor.

God certainly gave Mary the grace she needed to be worthy of the calling that he extended to her.

Do we have faith that the same God gives us the grace we need to be faithful to the calling that God extends to us?

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(August 23, 2016: Rose of Lima, Virgin)

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“Stand firm and hold fast...”

In his Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul challenges us to “stand firm and hold fast” in the faith we received. We see in the example of today’s saint just one of many ways to “stand firm and hold fast to the Lord.”

“The first canonized saint of the New World has one characteristic of all saints—the suffering of opposition—and another characteristic which is more for admiration than for imitation—excessive practice of mortification.

She was born to parents of Spanish descent in Lima, Peru, at a time when South America was in its first century of evangelization. She seems to have taken Catherine of Siena (April 29) as a model, in spite of the objections and ridicule of parents and friends.”

“The saints have so great a love of God that what seems bizarre to us, and is indeed sometimes imprudent, is simply a logical carrying out of a conviction that anything that might endanger a loving relationship with God must be rooted out. So, because her beauty was so often admired, Rose used to rub her face with pepper to produce disfiguring blotches. Later, she wore a thick circlet of silver on her head, studded on the inside, like a crown of thorns.

When her parents fell into financial trouble, she worked in the garden all day and sewed at night. Ten years of struggle against her parents began when they tried to make Rose marry. They refused to let her enter a convent, and out of obedience she continued her life of penance and solitude at home as a member of the Third Order of St. Dominic. So deep was her desire to live the life of Christ that she spent most of her time at home in solitude.”

“During the last few years of her life, Rose set up a room in the house where she cared for homeless children, the elderly and the sick. This was a beginning of social services in Peru. Though secluded in life and activity, she was brought to the attention of Inquisition interrogators, who could only say that she was influenced by grace.”

“What might have been a merely eccentric life was transfigured from the inside. If we remember some unusual penances, we should also remember the greatest thing about Rose: a love of God so ardent that it withstood ridicule from without, violent temptation and lengthy periods of sickness. When she died at 31, the city turned out for her funeral. Prominent men took turns carrying her coffin.”

<http://www.americancatholic.org/Features/Saints/saint.aspx?id=1116>

We see in the example of Rose of Lima just one of many ways to “stand firm and hold fast to the Lord”.

Today, how might we follow her example in our own way?

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(August 24, 2016: Bartholomew, Apostle)

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“Your friends make known, O Lord, the glorious splendor of your Kingdom...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“You can see how God – by progressive stages filled with unutterable sweetness – leads the soul forward and enables it to leave the Egypt of sin. He leads it from love to love, as from dwelling to dwelling, until He has made it enter into the Promised Land. By this I mean that God brings it into most holy charity, which, to state it succinctly, is a form of friendship...Such friendship is true friendship, since it is reciprocal, for God has eternally loved all those who have loved Him, who now love Him or who will love Him in time...He has openly revealed all His secrets to us as to His closest friends...” (TLG, Book II, Chapter 22, pp. 160 - 161)

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is clear and unambiguous about the quality that makes Bartholomew (a.k.a., Nathaniel) a friend of God: “There is no guile in him.” There is no pretense in Bartholomew – nothing fake, nothing phony. Jesus sees him as a man who is real, authentic and transparent. In other words, Jesus is an open book.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales offered some practical advice regarding how to practice the virtue of guilelessness

“Your language should be retrained, frank, sincere, candid unaffected and honest...As the sacred Scripture tells us, The Holy Spirit does not dwell in a deceitful or tricky soul. No artifice is so good and desirable as plain dealing. Worldly prudence and carnal artifice belong to the children of this world, but the children (the friends) of God walk a straight path and their hearts are without guile.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 30, p. 206)

Today, do you want to be a friend of God? Then, Like Bartholomew, strive to be guileless. Simply try to be yourself – nothing more and nothing less.

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Spirituality Matters 2016: August 25th - August 31st

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(August 25, 2016: Louis IX of France, King)

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“If the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into.

“St. Louis led an exemplary life. His biographers have told us of the long hours he spent in prayer, fasting, and penance, without the knowledge of his subjects. The French king was a great lover of justice. It was during his reign that the ‘court of the king’ (*curia regis*) was organized into a regular court of justice, having competent experts, and judicial commissions acting at regular periods.”

“He was renowned for his charity. ‘The peace and blessings of the realm come to us through the poor,’ he would say. Beggars were fed from his table, he ate their leavings, washed their feet, ministered to the wants of the lepers, and daily fed over one hundred poor. He founded many hospitals and houses: the House of the Felles-Dieu for reformed prostitutes; the Quinze-Vingt for three hundred blind men and the hospitals at Pontoise, Vernon, and Compiègne.”

“St. Louis was a man of sound common sense, possessing indefatigable energy, graciously kind and of playful humor, and constantly guarding against the temptation to be imperious. His personal qualities as well as his saintliness greatly enhanced the prestige of the French monarchy. [Boniface VIII](#) canonized St. Louis at [Orvieto](#) in 1297.” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09368a.htm>

In a letter addressed to Jane de Chantal’s son Celse-Benigne, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Imagine that you were a courtier of St. Louis. This holy king liked the people around him to be brave, courageous, generous, cheerful, courteous, affable, frank and polite – but above all, he wanted them to be good Christians. If you had been with him you would have seen him laugh merrily when the occasion offered, speak out boldly when the need arose, maintaining a brave outward show of royal splendor and dignity (like another Solomon), and in the next moment you would have seen him serving the poor at the hospitals, and in short marrying civil virtue to Christian virtue, and majesty to humility. And this, in a word, should be your aim: to be no less brave for being a Christian, and to be no less Christian for being brave.” (Stopp, [Selected Letters](#), pp. 189 - 190)

St. Louis was clearly the master of the house – he was the master of a kingdom. But what made him great as a master of both people and place was how he welcomed people into his home and into his heart.

How might we follow his way of imitating the eternal Master by making room in our homes and our hearts for others - just this day?

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(August 26, 2016: Friday, Twenty-first Week Ordinary Time)

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“For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

In the book [Saints are not Sad](#) (1949,) we read

“Holiness, in Francis de Sales’ conception of it, should be an all-around quality without abruptness or eccentricity. It should not involve the suppression in us of anything that is not in itself bad, for the likeness to God which is its essence must be incomplete in the proportion that it does not extend to the whole of us. So we must be truthful to ourselves and about ourselves, and we shall lose as much by not seeing the good that really is in us as by fancying that we see good that is not there at all. It is as right and due that we should thank God for the virtue that His grace has established in us as that we should ask His forgiveness for our sinfulness that hinders His grace.” ([Select Salesian Subjects](#), # 0377, p. 85)

God calls us to holiness. God calls us to walk in his ways. Imperfect as we are, we can make great progress in this quest by accepting the grace of God, by putting God’s grace to work in action and by relying on the love, support and encouragement of others. This call to holiness also challenges us to be truthful with ourselves and about ourselves - to recognize what is good in us, as well as anything in us needing to be purified. While we

will always be imperfect – while we will always be reminded of our weakness – we don't need to be perfect to strive for perfection.

Today, how can the “foolishness of God” help us to become sources of God’s strength today?

Today, how can God help us to transform our weakness into greatness in the service of others today?

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(August 27, 2016: Monica)

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“It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus...”

“St. Monica was married by arrangement to a pagan official in North Africa, who was much older than she, and although generous, was also violent tempered. His mother lived with them and was equally difficult, which proved a constant challenge to St. Monica. She had three children; Augustine, Navigius, and Perpetua. Through her patience and prayers, she was able to convert her husband and his mother to the Christian faith in 370. He died a year later. Perpetua and Navigius entered the religious life. St. Augustine was much more difficult, as she had to pray for him for seventeen years, begging the prayers of priests who - for a while - tried to avoid her because of her persistence at this seemingly hopeless endeavor. One priest did attempt to encourage her by saying, ‘It is not possible that the son of so many tears should perish.’ This thought, coupled with a vision that she had received, strengthened her in her prayers and hopes for her son. Finally, St. Augustine was baptized by St. Ambrose in 387. St. Monica died later that same year in the Italian town of Ostia, on the way back to Africa from Rome.” (http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=1)

We can all relate to Saint Monica. We all have people in our lives for whom we want the best. We all have people in our lives that we want to be happy. We all have people in our lives about whom we have concerns and heartaches. Of course, as much as we might love someone else, we cannot live their lives for them. Sometimes the most we can do is to pray for them, encourage them and support them. As for the rest, we need leave it in the hands of God and hope that God will do His best.

Saint Monica is a model of courage. We see in her struggles the power that flows from a life of prayer and perseverance. And while Augustine may have ultimately been converted to the way of Jesus Christ through divine intervention, the prayers of his mother probably played no small part in his conversion.

How can we imitate Monica’s example today, especially when it comes to loved ones about whom we care so deeply?

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(August 28, 2016: Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“Conduct your affairs with humility, and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts. Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God.”

How do we find favor with God by humbling ourselves? For that matter, when we humble ourselves, what are we really doing?

First of all, humility challenges us to avoid two extremes in life: the temptations to either exalt ourselves or trash ourselves. Francis de Sales offered very concrete examples of how to do this.

"I don't want to play either the fool or the wise man, for if humility forbids me to play the sage, candor and sincerity forbid me to act the fool. Just as I would not parade knowledge even of what I actually know; so, by contrast, I would not pretend to be ignorant of it. Humility conceals and covers the other virtues in order to preserve them, but it also reveals them when charity so requires in order that we might enlarge, increase and perfect them." (Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, Chapter 5)

On a deeper level, humility is about acknowledging both our littleness and God's greatness.

"Let us consider what God has done for us and what we have done against God, and as we reflect upon our sins one by one let us also consider God's graces one by one. There is no need to fear that the knowledge of God's gifts will make us proud if only we remember this truth: none of the good in us comes from ourselves alone." (Ibid)

Finally, having a balanced view of ourselves, acknowledging our littleness and God's greatness and being grateful for God's fidelity to us, lead us to live lives of generosity.

"Generous minds do not amuse themselves with the petty toys of rank, honor and titles. They have other things to do. Such things belong only to idle minds. Those who own pearls do not bother about shells, while those who aspire to virtue do not trouble themselves over honors." (Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, Chapter 4)

Humbling ourselves is not about putting ourselves down. No, humbling ourselves is about taking our rightful place in life - beneficiaries of God's love for us and instruments of God's love in the lives of other people.

Humility is ultimately about coming to know our place in God's plan of salvation and having the courage to take and embrace it. This true humility, in turn, should lead us to gently and respectfully encourage others in their quest to likewise know their place in God's plan of salvation and to have the courage to take it.

What better way of finding favor with God than by pursuing this quest together!

And why not start today?

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(August 29, 2016: The Passion of John the Baptist)

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"Lord, I love your commands..."

"All the martyrs died for divine love. When we say that many of them died for the faith, we must not imply that it was for a 'dead faith' but rather for a living faith, that is, faith animated by charity. Moreover, our confession of faith is not so much an act of the intellect as an act of the will and love of God. For this reason, on the day of the Passion the great St. Peter preserved his faith in his soul – but lost charity – since he refused in words to admit as Master Him whom in his heart he acknowledged to be such. But there are other martyrs who died expressly for charity alone. Such was the Savior's great Precursor who suffered martyrdom because he gave fraternal correction..." (TLG, Book VII, Chapter 10, pp. 40-41)

We see in John the Baptist one who loved the commands of the Lord. As the herald of Jesus both before and after the latter's baptism in the Jordan, John respected, honored and loved the Lord, as well as the things, values and standards of the Lord. His willingness to stand firm in the Lord and in the ways of the Lord

impelled him to call Herod out on his immoral lifestyle (taking his brother's wife to be his own) in a very public forum. His love of the Lord and the commands of the Lord ultimately cost John his life.

John didn't lose his head over some mere intellectual principle. No, he gave it because of something he believed from – and in – the depth of his heart.

How far are we willing to go for the things, the values and the people that we hold deeply in our hearts, presuming, of course, we possess such deep, heartfelt convictions?

Today, on what issues – and for whom – are we willing to stand firm, whatever the cost?

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(August 30, 2016: Tuesday, Twenty-second Week Ordinary Time)

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“We have the mind of Christ...”

What does it mean to “have the mind of Christ”? What does the “mind of Christ” look like?

Today's Gospel certainly provides a practical answer, powerfully portrayed!

Look how Jesus used his God-given power - the power of both word and action. He didn't use it for his own aggrandizement. On the contrary, Jesus used it for the benefit of others. If his audience was “astonished at his teaching,” one can only imagine how astonished they must have been when Jesus expelled an unclean demon from a man in the synagogue! Jesus' “one-two punch” approach to preaching – employing both word *and* action – stood in stark contrast to the preaching of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes which Jesus himself criticized as being too long on words and too short on action.

What does it look like when “we have the mind of Christ”? When we both speak like Christ and act like Christ, that is, when we not only wish people well – in words – but also we do what we can – in actions – to make our wish for others' welfare a reality.

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(August 31, 2016: Wednesday, Twenty-second Week Ordinary Time)

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“We are God's co-workers...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“God acts in our works, and we co-operate in God's action. God leaves for our part all the merit and profit of our services and good works; we leave God all the honor and praise thereof, acknowledging that the growth, the progress, and the end of all the good we do depends on God's mercy, finishing what God had begun. O God, how *merciful* is God's goodness to us in thus distributing his bounty!”(TLG, Book XI, Chapter 6, p. 212)

It would be enough if God simply made us the recipients of his mercy and generosity, but in his wisdom, God has also made us the agents or instruments of his mercy and generosity. Our common vocation is not simply limited to enjoying the gift of creation, but rather we are called to nurture it, care for it, shepherd it and develop

it! God works in and through us; we work in and through God's action. To us come all of the benefits, but to God goes all of the glory.

Who could ask for a better arrangement than that?

We are – in word and in deed – God's co-workers. We celebrate both God's generosity to us and share that generosity with others.

Today, how might God employ our cooperation in both receiving – and sharing – his bounty?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: September 1st - September 7th

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(September 1, 2016: Thursday, Twenty-second Week Ordinary Time)

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"If anyone among you considers himself wise, let him become a fool, so as to become wise..."

This apparent paradox – wisdom as foolishness, foolishness as wisdom – is found in both the Old and New Testaments. Of course, it is “worldly” wisdom that is foolish, whereas divine “foolishness” is, in truth, authentic wisdom. Put another way, when our “wisdom” makes us the center of the universe, we are truly the most foolish of men. By contrast, when we are so “foolish” as to make God the center of the universe, it is only then that we can hope to become truly wise.

Francis de Sales was no stranger to this paradox. In his Introduction to the Devout Life, he wrote:

“We recognize genuine goodness as we do genuine balm. If balm sinks down and stays at the bottom when dropped into water, it is rated the best and most valuable. So also, in order to know whether a person is truly wise, learned, generous and noble, we must observe whether his abilities tend to humility, modesty, and obedience for in that case they will be truly good. If they float on the surface and seek to show themselves they are so much less genuine insofar as they are showier. People's virtues and fine qualities when conceived and nurtured by pride, show and vanity have the mere appearance of good without juice, marrow and solidity. Honors, dignities and rank are like saffron, which thrives best and grows most plentifully when trodden under foot. It is no honor to be handsome if a person prizes himself for it; if beauty is to have good grace, it should be unstudied. Learning dishonors us when it inflates our minds and degenerates into mere pedantry. Just as honor is an excellent thing when given to us freely, so, too, it becomes base when demanded, sought after and asked for.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 4, pp. 132-133)

So, ask yourself the question: “Does my wisdom inflate my mind, or does it tend to humility, modesty and obedience?” If your answer is the former, you may be far more foolish than you know. By contrast, if your answer is the latter, you may be far wiser than you ever thought possible.

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(September 2, 2016: Friday, Twenty-second Week Ordinary Time)

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“Do not make any judgment before the appointed time...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales makes a direct reference to this admonition from St. Paul, when he wrote:

“‘No,’ says the Apostle, ‘judge not before the time until the Lord comes, when He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and will make manifest the counsel of hearts.’ The judgments of the children of men are rash because they are not the judges of one another, and when they pass judgments on others they usurp the office of the Lord. They are rash because the principal malice of sin depends on the intention and counsel of the heart, and to us they are the hidden things of darkness. They are rash because every man has enough on which he ought to judge himself without taking it upon him to judge his neighbor. To avoid future judgment it is equally necessary both to refrain from judging others and to judge ourselves.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 28, pp. 196-197))

Note that Paul is willing to go even a step further than St. Francis de Sales when it comes to making judgments. The former goes so far as to say, “I do not even pass judgment on myself”. In the big scheme of things, each of us has more than enough on our own plate each day just trying to live our lives as best we can without spending extra time and energy (that we really don’t have) judging ourselves and others. Besides, who are we to judge? After all, as both St. Paul and St. Francis de Sales point out, it is God who is the one and only just judge.

Just today, try and remember this admonition: whether toward others or ourselves, judging is simply above our pay grade.

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(September 3, 2016: Gregory the Great, Pope & Doctor of the Church)

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“Have you not read what David did when he and those who were with him were hungry? How he went into the house of God, took the bread of offering, which only the priests could lawfully eat, ate of it, and shared it with his companions?”

In today’s Gospel, some Pharisees accused Jesus’ disciples of breaking the Sabbath by picking heads of grain in order to feed themselves. The Pharisees seem to suggest that in life you have to choose between what is reasonable and what is right. As he frequently did, Jesus turned the Pharisees’ rationale on its head by suggesting that often times that which is most reasonable is most lawful.

In the Salesian tradition, we know this position as “liberty of spirit”. In a letter to St. Jane de Chantal, Francis cites examples in an attempt to describe this “liberty of spirit”:

“Take the case of Cardinal Borromeo. He was one of the most precise, unbending and austere men imaginable. He lived on bread and water, He was so strict that after he became archbishop he only visited his brothers’ homes twice in twenty-four years, and in those cases only because they were ill. He only went into his own garden twice. Nevertheless, this strict man, who often accepted invitations from his Swiss neighbors in the hope of winning them back to the truth, made no difficulty about drinking a couple of healths or toasts with them at every meal, over and above what he needed to still his thirst. Here you see the trait of a holy liberty in one of the most austere men of our times. A lax person would have overdone it, a scrupulous mind would have feared committing mortal sin, but a true liberty of spirit does it out of love.”

“Bishop Spiridion of old once took in a famished pilgrim during the season of Lent. There was nothing available to eat except salt meat, so the bishop had some cooked and served it to the pilgrim. The visitor did not want to take the meat in spite of his hunger, so, out of charity Spiridion ate some first so as to remove the pilgrim’s scruples by his example. Here we see the loving freedom of a holy man. In another example, Ignatius

Loyola ate meat on Wednesday in Holy Week because the doctor ordered it and thought it expedient for some trouble that Ignatius was having. A person of scrupulous mind would have contested this point for at least a good three days.”(Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 73)

Consumed as they were about not breaking any laws, the Pharisees almost always placed this concern heads and shoulders above meeting the needs of others. By contrast, Jesus was convinced that meeting the needs of others was the fulfillment of the law. Francis de Sales put it this way (in all caps, by the way!):

LOVE AND NOT FORCE SHOULD INSPIRE ALL YOU DO; LOVE OBEDINECE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE

By all means, try your level best to observe God’s Law today. And above all, try your level best to observe the greatest of all God’s Laws – the Law of Love.

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(September 4, 2016: Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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"If one of you decides to build a tower, will you not first sit down and calculate the outlay to see if you can accomplish the project?"

Life can be frustrating enough at times without making it worse by failing to look ahead. How many times have we had to go back to the grocery store because we didn't first make a list of what we needed to buy? How often have we run to Lowe's or Home Depot three, four, five times or more on the same day because we simply didn't take the time to first consider all the materials that we would need in order to accomplish a project? How many vacations or trips have been soured because we failed first to sit down and consider all the things we should bring?

Anything worth doing - no matter how simple or complex - is worth doing well. And the first step in doing something well is to plan ahead.

We clearly hear echoes of this truth in the parable from Luke's Gospel. Jesus admonishes his audience to determine first what it is they will need to complete an important task before embarking on the task itself. For his part, St. Francis de Sales recommends:

"Be careful and attentive to all the matters that God has committed to your care. Since God has confided them to you, God wishes you to have great care for them."

Of course, we know that the Salesian tradition cautions us not to become so obsessed with advanced planning that we become anxious or compulsive. However, this same tradition cautions us against performing tasks or projects in a careless or haphazard manner. Our own experience clearly demonstrates the maxim, “Those who fail to plan are planning to fail”.

Take a page from the life of Jesus himself. Before undertaking his public ministry, he went into the desert where he no doubt took stock of all that he would need to accomplish God's great project for him - the salvation of the human family. Jesus didn't begin his ministry in a haphazard fashion and he didn't make it up as he went along. He was deliberate and was prudent. Before he began his ministry in earnest, he first considered all that he would need - with the Father's love - to redeem all creation through his life, love, passion, death and resurrection.

God has entrusted to us the most important of all projects - to continue Christ's work on earth and to be sources of God's peace, justice, reconciliation, truth, hope, care, concern and love for one another. Like the tower in today's Gospel parable, accomplishing this task can sometimes be a tall order indeed. Few of us, however, have the luxury of setting aside forty days in the desert to determine what we need in order to follow God's will - to be the kind of people that God calls us to be. So are we supposed to calculate what we'll need to be successful - to be faithful - in pursuing this greatest of all projects?

How about starting with the first few minutes of every new day?

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(September 5, 2016: Labor Day)

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“I ask you, is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?”

Labor Day offers us a great opportunity to reflect upon the great work to which each of us is called – to continue the creating, healing and inspiring action of Jesus Christ in the lives of others in ways that fit the state and stage of life in which we find ourselves. *Eucharistic Prayer IV* in the former Sacramentary (supplanted by the Roman Missal) put it this way:

“Father, we acknowledge your greatness: all your actions show your wisdom and love. You formed man in your own likeness and set him over the whole world to serve you, his creator, and to rule over all creatures...To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation, to prisoners, freedom, and to those in sorrow, joy...And that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him, he sent the Holy Spirit from you, Father, as his first gift to those who believe, to complete his work on earth...”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus finds himself defending his decision to cure someone on the Sabbath, an act forbidden insofar as it was perceived as performing “work” on the day of “rest”. Of course, as we see so clearly in the life of Jesus, each and every day provides us with opportunities to work for good in all kinds of ways in the lives of others.

On this Labor Day, how might we do something to help complete Christ’s work on earth in our relationships with one another? What good work(s) can we accomplish in the name of Jesus, the Master of the Sabbath Day...and every day?

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(September 6, 2016: Tuesday, Twenty-third Week Ordinary Time)

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“Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to be able to settle a case between brothers?”

“Litigation (that is, the conduct of a lawsuit) is as old as civilized history. Evidence of trials exists in the hieroglyphic stone tablets of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, the scrolls of Rome and Greece, and even the ideographs of the Chinese dynasties. The ancient Romans allowed law to be practiced directly by the “citizen,” without the necessity of a representative—a crude practice that was abolished, coincidentally, shortly before the fall of the empire. Likewise, the third century Chinese scholar Shao Chin Tse-Tse wrote in his seminal history of the Tang Dynasty, Ten Percent Fruit Juice, “The way of Confucius required that all disputes be brought before the Emperor by representatives of noble lineage...”

(<http://www.publishlawyer.com/history.htm>)

And what exactly is a lawsuit?

“A lawsuit (or much less commonly a “suit in law”) is a civil action brought in a court of law in which a plaintiff - a party who claims to have incurred loss as a result of a defendant's actions - demands a legal or equitable remedy. The defendant is required to respond to the plaintiff's complaint. If the plaintiff is successful, judgment will be given in the plaintiff's favor, and a variety of court orders may be issued to enforce a right, award damages, or impose a temporary or permanent injunction to prevent an act or compel an act. A declaratory judgment may be issued to prevent future legal disputes. Although not as common, a lawsuit may also refer to a criminal action, criminal proceeding, or criminal claim.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawsuit>)

We've all suffered injustice at the hands of another person. We've all been the victim of someone else's deceit or deception. We've all been cheated, betrayed or defrauded by someone else. We need to address these wrongs, and in extreme cases, we may even need to seek remedies through litigation. But setting aside the extremes cases, might it not be far better on any given day to try to resolve our claims in the court of common sense before resorting to the court of law?

Before choosing litigation, how about first trying reconciliation?

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(September 7, 2016: Wednesday, Twenty-third Week Ordinary Time)

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“The world in its present form is passing away ...”

The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, is famous for this dictum: “The only constant is change”. In a letter to Madame de Chantal, Francis de Sales penned a similar sentiment when he wrote:

“I see that all of the seasons of the year converge in your soul: at times you experience all the dryness, distraction, disgust and boredom of winter; at other times, all the dew and fragrance of the little flowers in May time; and again, the warmth of a desire to please God. All that remains is autumn, and you say that you do not see much of its fruit. Yet it often happens that in threshing the wheat and pressing the grapes we discover more than the harvest or vintage promised. You would like it to be always spring or summer; but no, dear daughter, we have to experience interior as well as exterior changes. Only in heaven will everything be springtime as to beauty, autumn as to enjoyment and summer as to love. There will be no winter there; but here below we need winter so that we may practice self-denial and the countless small but beautiful virtues that can be practiced during a barren season. Let us go on our little way; so long as we mean well and hold on to our resolve, we can only be on the right track...” (LSD, p. 148)

Whether we realize it or not, the world in its present form is *always* passing away, because no two days, hours or moments are precisely the same. For that matter, neither are we and/or other people with whom we are engaged in a variety of relationships on any given day. While change is not always easy for us, change is at the core of what it means to be human and change appears to be quite good for us.

Perhaps change is the only constant, after all, but with one notable exception.

The love that God has for us - that *never* changes!

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Spirituality Matters 2016: September 8th - September 14th

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(September 8, 2016: Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

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“We know that all things work for good for those who love God...”

When Joachim and Ann welcomed their daughter Mary into the world, who could have known – or imagined – that she was destined to become the mother of the Messiah? Who could have thought that this simple, poor and unassuming maiden would be the vehicle through whom God would fulfill his promise of salvation? Who could have anticipated that her simple “yes” as the handmaid of the Lord would change the course of the world forever?

How about you? Who could have thought that God would bring you out of nothingness in order that you might experience the beauty of being someone? Who would have imagined that God would use your ordinary, everyday life to continue his ongoing creative, redemptive and inspiring action? Who could have known that your attempts to say “yes” to God’s will on a daily basis – however imperfectly – could change other peoples’ lives for the better?

God did it! God continues to do it! And God will continue to do it!

Forever!

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(September 9, 2016: Peter Claver, Priest and Missionary)

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“What then is my recompense? That, when I preach, I offer the Gospel free of charge so as not to make full use of my right in the Gospel.”

“A contemporary of St. Francis de Sales, St. Peter Claver was born at Verdu, Catalonia, Spain, in 1580, of impoverished parents descended from ancient and distinguished families. He studied at the Jesuit college of Barcelona, entered the Jesuit novitiate at Tarragona in 1602 and took his final vows on August 8th, 1604. While studying philosophy at Majorca, the young religious was influenced by St. Alphonsus Rodriguez to go to the Indies and save ‘millions of perishing souls.’”

“In 1610, he landed at Cartagena (modern Colombia), the principal slave market of the New World, where a thousand slaves were landed every month. After his ordination in 1616, he dedicated himself by special vow to the service of the Negro slaves - a work that was to last for thirty-three years. He labored unceasingly for the salvation of the African slaves and the abolition of the Negro slave trade, and the love he lavished on them was something that transcended the natural order.”

“Boarding the slave ships as they entered the harbor, he would hurry to the revolting inferno of the hold, and offer whatever poor refreshments he could afford; he would care for the sick and dying, and instruct the slaves through Negro catechists before administering the Sacraments. Through his efforts three hundred thousand souls entered the Church. Furthermore, he did not lose sight of his converts when they left the ships, but followed them to the plantations to which they were sent, encouraged them to live as Christians, and prevailed

on their masters to treat them humanely. He died in 1654.” (http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=94)

In addition to preaching the Gospel “free of charge”, Peter Claver was willing to spend himself in the service of others, especially those enslaved.

Today, how can we model his example of dedicated service to those with whom we live and work close to home?

Today, how can we sources of liberation in the lives of others?

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(September 10, 2016: Saturday, Twenty-third Week Ordinary Time)

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“We, though many, are one body...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, St. Francis de Sales wrote:

“The supreme unity of the divine act is opposed to confusion and disorder but not to distinction and variety. On the contrary, it employs these last to bring forth beauty by reducing all difference and diversity to proportion, proportion to order and order to the unity of the world, which comprises all things, both visible and invisible. All these together are called the universe perhaps because all their diversity is reduced to unity, as if one were to say ‘universe,’ that is, unique and diverse, unique along with diversity and diverse along with unity. In sum, God’s supreme unity diversifies all things and his permanent eternity gives change to all things...” (TLG, Book II, Chapter 2, p. 106)

Everything – be it our physical bodies, our families or our churches – is made of a variety of things. Everybody – be it our physical bodies, our families or our churches – works best when each and every part does what it is designed and destined to do.

Each and every one of us makes up some part of the Body of Christ. The fact that no two of us are exactly the same actually makes possible the unity toward which Jesus challenges us to work. In this fact, we experience a great paradox, perhaps the greatest of all. It is only when each of us is fully and authentically our unique selves that unity with others is truly possible. Put another way, unity is not the same as uniformity, i.e., being exactly the same. Where everything or everybody is the same, there can never be true unity.

Just this day, do you want to do your part to contribute something to the unity of any body – be it family, friends, neighbors, co-workers or church goers – of which you are a part? Then simply try your level best to be your unique self.

And allow – even encourage – others to do the same!

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(September 11, 2016: Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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“The Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.”

Today's scriptural readings pull no punches in describing the sorry lot of sinners. The people upon whom God has showered his preferential love have become “depraved and stiff-necked”, turning from the worship of the one true God to that of a molten calf. Before the puny creation of their own hands, they bow in worship and sacrifice.

The author of Psalm 51 readily admits his guilt and sin before a God of goodness and compassion. St. Paul speaks bluntly of the way he was and the manner in which he lived his life before coming to faith in Jesus. He was - he candidly admits - a blasphemer and a persecutor of God's holy people. His was an unparalleled spiritual arrogance. Finally, the Gospel relates the familiar story of a profligate younger son who squanders all his inheritance in a reckless and dissolute life and, in the process, breaks his father's heart.

What is the point of this litany of sin, guilt, human weakness and failure? It is the dark side of Gospel Good News. It is the bleak background against which the bright beauty and sheer graciousness of Jesus' redemptive deed shines out in all its splendor. It is the humble acknowledgment of one's total powerlessness and loss as the result of having sinned against a good and compassionate God. This humility - this truth about ourselves - is *the* necessary precondition for being able to hear the clarion call of the Good News of faith and to receive in gratitude the healing power of grace.

Today, too often we are hesitant to speak of sin, especially of personal sin. We do not like to acknowledge that we have rejected God or have turned aside from the way he has pointed to us in Scripture in the example and word of Jesus and in the teachings of his Church. Yet, it is just such an acknowledgement, in humility and truth, that readies us for the freeing experience of God's tender and forgiving grace.

Saints are often converted sinners. This truth is what is proclaimed loud and clear in the Scriptures today. Grace takes the weak and wobbly - even the most heart-hardened sinners - and transforms them into saints and heroes.

St. Francis de Sales had a great respect for the example of saints, but he wanted people to see the saints in a realistic manner, that is, as weak and sinful people who, through the transforming power of grace, had become heroes. St. Peter was such a hero for Francis. He was captivated by this man who, though often heroic and always well-meaning, was nevertheless frequently short on courage (“I do not know the man!”) or weak in understanding what Jesus really stood for (“Get behind me, you Satan!”), and who more than once fell flat on his face. Yet, what a giant that man became through grace! In St. Peter, Francis de Sales found it spiritually useful to speak of a man with whose failures his people could relate, and of a saint whose holiness they could imitate. His hero had warts. In pointing them out, he was in effect, encouraging others in their quest for holiness.

Let us end with St. Paul's exuberant hymn of praise in today's second reading. It celebrates the triumph of grace over human sin and weakness: “To the king of ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God, honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

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(September 12, 2016: Most Holy Name of Mary)

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“Only say the word and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man subject to authority...”

In a sermon about St. Joseph and the Holy Family, Francis de Sales observed:

“Shall we dare to say that we can very well govern ourselves, and that we have no need of the help and direction of those whom God has given to us for our guidance, not esteeming them, indeed, capable enough for

us? Tell me; was the Angel in any way superior to Our Lord or to Our Lady? Had he a better intellect or more judgment? By no means! Was he more qualified for the work of guidance? Was he endowed with any special or peculiar grace? That could not be, seeing that Our Lord is both God and man, and that Our Lady, being His Mother, had, in consequence, more grace and perfection than all the Angels together; nevertheless the Angel commands and is obeyed. See what rank is observed in the Holy Family! No doubt it was the same as it is among sparrow-hawks, where the hen-bird rules and is superior to the male.”

“Who could doubt for a moment that Our Lady was much superior to St. Joseph, and that she had more discretion and qualities more fit for ruling than her spouse? Yet the Angel never addresses himself to her as regards anything that has to be done, either as to going or coming, or whatever it might be. Does it not seem to you that the Angel commits a great indiscretion in addressing himself to St. Joseph rather than to Our Lady, who is the head of the house, as possessing the treasure of the Eternal Father? Had she not just reason to be offended by this proceeding and by this mode of treatment? Doubtless she might have said to her spouse: ‘Why should I go into Egypt, since my Son has not revealed to me that I must go, still less has the Angel spoken to me on the subject?’ Yet Our Lady makes no such remark; she is not in the least offended because the Angel addresses himself to St. Joseph; she obeys quite simply, knowing that God has so ordained it. She does not ask: ‘Why?’ It is sufficient for her that He wills it so, and that it is His pleasure that we should submit without hesitation. ‘But I am more than the Angel,’ she might have said, ‘and more than St. Joseph.’ No such thought occurs to her.”

“Let it, then, be enough to know that God wishes us to obey, without occupying ourselves with considering the capability of those whom we are called upon to obey. In this way we shall bring down our minds to walk simply in the happy path of a holy and tranquil humility which will render us infinitely pleasing to God.”

This message is a great insight that Francis de Sales offers regarding the virtue – and practice – of obedience. The essence of obedience (from the Latin meaning *to listen*) is not just doing simply what we’re told to do, but obedience is recognizing that each person in our lives has a unique role to play in helping us to become the people that God wants us to be. The centurion displayed the virtue of obedience less by telling Jesus to give him an order and more by his recognizing who Jesus was in his life. And, as the Gospel clearly illustrates, this was an obedience with which Jesus was not only well pleased – He was awestruck!

Today, ht we imitate the great example of the centurion in our attempts to be obedient – that is, to listen – to the voice of Jesus?

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(September 13, 2016: Chrysostom, Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

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“Now the body is not a single part, but many.”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, St. Francis de Sales wrote:

“The supreme unity of the divine act is opposed to confusion and disorder but not to distinction and variety. On the contrary, it employs these last to bring forth beauty by reducing all difference and diversity to proportion, proportion to order and order to the unity of the world, which comprises all things, both visible and invisible. All these together are called the universe perhaps because all their diversity is reduced to unity, as if one were to say ‘universe,’ that is, unique and diverse, unique along with diversity and diverse along with unity. In sum, God’s supreme unity diversifies all things and his permanent eternity gives change to all things...” (TLG, Book II, Chapter 2, p. 106)

Everything— be it our physical bodies, our families or our churches — is made up a variety of things. Everything our physical bodies, our families or our churches — works best when each and every part does what it is designed and destined to do.

Each and every one of us makes up some part of the Body of Christ. The fact that no two of us are exactly the same actually makes possible the unity toward which Jesus asks us to work. In this challenge we experience a great paradox, perhaps the greatest of all paradoxes. It is only when each of us is fully and authentically our unique selves that unity with others is truly possible. Put another way, unity is not the same as uniformity, i.e., being exactly the same. Where everything or everybody is the same, then there can never be true unity.

Just this day, do you want to do your part to contribute something to the unity of any body — be it family, friends, neighbors, co-workers or church goers — of which you are a part? Then simply try your level best to be your unique self.

And allow — even encourage — others to do the same!

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(September 14, 2016: Exaltation of the Holy Cross)

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“He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

In a sermon preached on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Francis de Sales remarked:

“St. Paul, the outstanding master and teacher of the newborn Church, discovered in the crucified Christ the blissful wellspring of his love, the theme of his sermons, the source of his boasting, the goal of all his ambitions in this world and the anchor of all his hopes for the world to come. I had no thought, he says, of bringing you any other knowledge than that of Jesus Christ, and of him crucified. God forbid that I should make a display of anything, except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...” ([Pulpit and Pew: A Study in Salesian Preaching](#))

The cross of Christ is the core of our lives. The cross of Christ is the central image of our faith. The cross of Christ is the path to our salvation.

Still, no less than five times in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus makes it very clear - if we wish to be his disciples, we must be willing to pick up not his cross, but pick up our own cross. We are not called to carry his cross, but ours. Put another way, we imitate the power and the promise of the cross of Christ precisely by being willing to embrace the crosses — the challenges, the burdens, the setbacks — that are part and parcel of our lives.

In short, the cross that we carry is the need to be ourselves — not somebody else — and to take all that comes with that effort.

Many of the crosses we carry are specific to the state and stage of life in which we find ourselves. Francis de Sales offers the following examples of the kinds of crosses that we might be asked to carry.

“To the pastors of the Church I offer a cross of care and labor, a shepherd’s toil to protect, to feed, to correct and perfect the flock. This was the cross first carried by our Lord who called himself the Good Shepherd: witness his journeys, his fatigue by Jacob’s well, his loving care for those who treated him badly.” (*Ibid*)

“To religious I offer the cross of solitude, celibacy and unworldliness. It is a cross that has touched the True Cross; it is a cross that was carried by Our Lady, the holiest, most innocent and completely crucified of all who ever loved the cross for Christ.” (*Ibid*)

“To those serving in government, I present the cross of learning, fairness and the sincerity of truth: a cross worthy of those who, St. Paul says, are in God’s service. Such a cross is ideal for crucifying merely secular values, for repressing self-interest: it encourages peace and quiet in the realm.” (*Ibid*)

“To workers, I offer the cross of humility and labor, a cross sanctified by our Lord himself in the carpenter’s shop. The cross of daily work is often a sure way to salvation; it may also be the best means of avoiding sin, for the devil finds work for idle hands.” (*Ibid*)

“For teenagers I have chosen the cross of obedience, purity and self-discipline. It will crucify the young blood of passion that is just coming to a boil: the boldness of youth still awaiting the guiding hand of prudence. It will teach them to bear the easy yoke of Christ in whatever calling in life God may place them.” (*Ibid*)

“For old people there is the cross of patience, gentleness and a helpful attitude towards the young. This cross demands a brave heart. They have learned that swift as a breath our lives pass away...” (*Ibid*)

“There is no shortage of crosses for married folk, but perhaps I could single out the cross of mutual support and faithfulness, and the cross of bringing up a family...” (*Ibid*)

There is but one cross of Jesus Christ. For us, however, our crosses come in many shapes, sizes and situations.

What cross might Christ be asking us to carry today?

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Spirituality Matters 2016: September 15th - September 21st

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(September 15, 2016: Our Lady of Sorrows)

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“You yourself a sword will pierce...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Various sacred lovers were present at the death of the Savior. Among them, those having the greatest love had the greatest sorrow, for love was then deeply plunged into sorrow and sorrow into love. All those who were filled with loving passion for their Savior were in love with his passion and sorrow. But his sweet Mother, who loved him more than all others, was more than all others pierced through and through by the sword of sorrow. Her Son’s sorrow at that time was a piercing sword that passed through the Mother’s heart, for that Mother’s heart was fastened, joined and united to her Son in so perfect a union that nothing could wound the one without inflicting the keenest pain upon the other...” (TLG, Book VII, Chapter 13, pp. 50-51)

Nobody should love sorrow. But, as we know from our own experience, sorrow is part-and-parcel of loving. If you’ve never experienced sorrow, chances are you’ve probably never experienced true love, either.

What more need be said?

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(September 16, 2016: Cornelius, Pope – Cyprian, Bishop - Martyrs)

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“Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep...”

First Fruits are a religious offering of the first agricultural produce of the harvest. In classical Greek, Roman, Hebrew and Christian religions, the first fruits were given to priests to offer to God. First Fruits were often a primary source of income to maintain the religious leaders as well as their places of worship...”
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Fruits)

First Fruits – the very First Fruits of the harvest – are things that many peoples offer to God before making use of any subsequent harvest for themselves. In today’s first reading from First Corinthians, Paul suggests that in the person of Jesus, First Fruits have taken on a whole new meaning: Jesus is the First Fruits of the New Covenant that God offers to us! The First Fruits of the Resurrection are something that God has set aside for us.

And continues to do so.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“When he created things, God commanded plants to bring forth their fruits – each one according to its kind. In like manner God commands Christians, the living plants of the Church, to bring forth the fruits of devotion, each according to one’s position and vocation.” (IDL, Part I, Chapter 3, p. 43)

What better way for us to express our gratitude for the First Fruits of divine life and love embodied in the person of Jesus than by sharing our fruits of devotion with one another?

First!

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(September 17, 2016: Robert Bellarmine, Bishop/Doctor of the Church)

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“A sower went out to sow...”

Some weeks ago we considered a variation of the parable of the sower. We suggested that there was something of the fate of each of the seeds contained inside each one of us. How many good beginnings in our lives have been trampled upon and/or consumed by something else? How many of us have hardened our hearts to do good things only to see them perish for lack of care? How many good ideas or intentions have failed to bear fruit because they were chocked off by other concerns? And still, withall our struggles and setbacks, many of the seeds of God’s goodness in us have taken root and produced a great harvest.

Just for today, let’s hear this parable in a different way. Think of all the big plans you have made for others. Think of all the good intentions that you’ve suggested to others. Think of all expectations that you’ve cradled in your heart for others. In other words, think of all the seeds that you’ve planted in the lives of other people. It’s very tempting – and even more discouraging – to focus on how many of those seeds never amounted to much – if anything at all. In the Salesian tradition, it is far better – and healthier to boot – to focus on how the

seeds that you may have possibly planted in others have taken root, have grown, and even flourished, sometimes beyond even your wildest dreams.

Can you think of any examples of this growth in your own life? Can you think of examples in the lives of others, especially in those people whom you know and love?

If not, just this day demonstrate how God might be asking you to sow good seeds in the heart or mind or another person?

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(September 18, 2016: Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much."

"One small step for a man; one giant leap for mankind."

Astronaut Neil Armstrong's words - accompanied as they were by the "thump" of his foot on the moon's surface - created a global image that affirmed once again our potential as human beings. It also gave us an image that inspires future generations to work together to realize still more dimensions of our human potential.

In his book Soul Mates (p viii), Thomas Moore approaches "soul making" very much in terms of symbols and imagination. In fact, his major premise with respect to conversion and transformation is that changing imagery is crucial to changing priorities and behaviors.

Changing priorities and behaviors was very much the thrust of St. Francis de Sales in his Introduction to the Devout Life. He promoted a very different image of holiness in his day and age. The prevailing image was monastic life, which saw the committed Christian life as removed from the affairs of the world. The new image was more like being at court, which saw the committed Christian life as being fully engaged in the affairs of the world. De Sales comments, "[Where ever we may be, we can and should aspire to live a holy life.](#)" (IDL, Part 1, Chapter 3)

This Salesian image offers a lens for seeing the message of today's Scriptures. Luke in his parable and Amos in his prophetic pronouncement speak to the man or woman engaged in the business of life, calling them to live in such a way as to give the fullest expression to their God-given dignity and destiny. From the negative, side Amos castigates the "so called" believers who cannot wait for the liturgy to be over and can return to fraud in the pursuit of profits. From the positive side, Jesus notes the unjust steward's prudence in meeting his needs in a crisis. He wishes this quality of clever prudence for all committed believers who want to love and serve God with their lives in and out of crisis.

What can sustain the committed Christian in the way of clever prudence? De Sales offers an image for prayer and reflection to care for the soul in this situation. He tells the devout Christian: "[Imitate little children who with one hand hold fast to their father while with the other they gather berries from the hedge.](#)" (IDL, Part 3, Chapter 10)

The most important thing we can do to become our whole selves in the business world (or anywhere for that matter) is to make an effort to stay connected and grounded. Time spent in honest prayer and reflection helps us connect with ourselves, with our values, with our faith community, our neighbor and quintessentially with our God "[in the midst of so much busyness.](#)" (Letters of Spiritual Direction, p. 163)

Justice, like its counterpart: beauty, truth, and love, all-too-often remain an abstraction. Fairness, woven into the heart of the committed Christian man or woman (indeed, of anyone), could collectively be such a “giant leap for mankind” for living a more grounded life and producing a more just and loving world.

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(September 19, 2016: Januarius, Bishop and Martyr)

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“Refuse no one the good on which he has a claim...”

Today’s selection from the Book of Proverbs offers us (as it usually does) some sound, practical advice. Simply put, if there is some good that you can do for another person – provided, of course, that it is within your power or purview to do so – you should do it! (Recall Nike’s tag line: “*Just do it!*”.)

But the Book of Proverbs also adds this caveat: do not postpone until tomorrow the opportunities to do something good today. One of the greatest obstacles we face in our attempts to do good things is the temptation to put them off - to wait for the right moment, for the perfect time or for the proper circumstances. How many things have never gotten done simply because somebody said, “I’ll get around to it later” or “There’s always tomorrow”.

It should be painfully obvious to each one of us that there will come a time in our lives when we will no longer have the opportunity to get around to it. There will, indeed, come a day for which there will be no tomorrow. So, why wait until later to do something good for somebody else, when you have the opportunity to do it today – now – at this moment?

Perhaps Rudyard Kipling’s (1865-1936) admonition can encourage us to not only do good things but also to do them in the here and now. He once wrote: “Live each day as though it were your last; one day, you’re sure to be right.”

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(September 20, 2016: Andrew Kim Tae-gon, Priest Paul Chong Ha-sang and Companions, Martyrs)

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“To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice...”

In English, sacrifice – a combination of forms of the Latin words *sacra* and *facere* – literally means the “surrender of something of value”. In a religious context, the word sacrifice conjures up images involving the offering of first fruits, valued animals, money and/or other things valued in a ritual fashion to god(s) in a place – such as a temple – considered to be sacred.

Today’s reading from the Book of Proverbs offers another perspective on the meaning of sacrifice. It has less to do with surrendering a particular thing of value in a sacred place and much more to do with being generous with everything in every place. In a letter to St. Jane de Chantal composed six months after their first encounter during his Lenten mission (1604) in Lyons, Francis de Sales wrote:

“I see that you have a debt of two thousand crowns; repay this as soon as you possibly can, and be careful as you can never withhold from others anything that belongs to them. Give alms in a small way but with great humility. I like the idea of your visiting the sick, old people, particularly women, and young people, those who are really young. I like to think of you visiting the poor, especially women, with great humility and meekness. I approve of your dividing your time between your father and your father-in-law and your working towards the

good of their souls... Try to make yourself more agreeable and more humble every day toward both your fathers and work toward their salvation in a spirit of gentleness..." (Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 69)

Francis recognized in Jane de Chantal a woman who wanted to do right by others. She tried to give others their due; she strived to give people what she owed them; she made every attempt to spread her life around to all those who needed her assistance and help. Francis saw in her a person who embodied a kind of sacrifice that was marked by her efforts to do what was right and just with everyday people in the context of her everyday life. She didn't merely give up things to God, but she handed over her very life for others.

Today, what kind of sacrifice can we make to God by doing what is right and just for other people?

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(September 21, 2016: Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist)

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"Live in a manner worthy of the call you have received..."

In his book This Saint's for You, Thomas Craughwell writes:

"During the Roman Empire, tax collecting was one of the most lucrative jobs a person could have. With the emperor's tacit approval, collectors were free to wring all they could from their district's taxpayers and then keep a portion of the proceeds for themselves. Caesar didn't mind the profiteering as long as the total assessed tax was delivered to his treasury. But Jewish taxpayers forced to pay the exorbitant sums weren't quite so forgiving, especially when the tax collector was a fellow Jew, like Matthew. Jewish tax collectors were regarded as loathsome collaborators and extortionists who exploited their own people. It's little wonder, then, that in the Gospels tax collectors are placed on par with harlots, thieves, and other shameless public sinners."

"Matthew collected taxes in Capernaum, a town in the northern province of Galilee and the site of a Roman garrison. Christ was a frequent visitor there, performing such miracles as healing the centurion's servant, curing Peter's ailing mother-in-law, and raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. One day, while passing the customs house where Matthew was busy squeezing extra shekels from his neighbors, Christ paused to say, 'Follow me.' That was all it took to touch Matthew's heart. He walked out of the customs house forever, giving up his life as a cheat to become an apostle, the author of a Gospel and eventually a martyr." (Page 12)

Just when Matthew thought he had it made – just when he thought he was living *la vita loca* – Christ changed his life by calling him to live in a manner worthy of what God had in mind for him. Matthew – who clearly recognized an opportunity when he saw one – dropped everything he had valued up until that very moment to follow Jesus. And the rest, as they say, is history.

It's amazing to consider how a handful of words can change the trajectory of one's life. A few words from Jesus transformed Matthew from being a human being who was all about taking from others into a man who was all about giving to others - even to the point of giving his very life.

Today, how might God's words invite us to change and to transform our lives?

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