

Sunday Salesian 2003 Archive

Mary, the Mother of God (January 1, 2003)

Readings Is 52: 7 - 10 Ps 98: 1-6 Heb 1: 1-6 Jn 1: 1-18 or 1: 1-5, 9-14

Suggested Emphasis

"How peaceful is my life right now?"

Salesian Perspective

Ask yourself, "How peaceful is my life right now?" As our country talks increasingly of a war that makes us wonder when war is a moral alternative, and our sons and daughters may be betting their lives on our choices, we long for peace. But, "How peaceful is MY life right now?" Personal turmoil, family crises, politically hot issues and terrorist fears affect us all in one way or another.

Yet in the Lukan gospel for today's feast of Mary, the Mother of God, we have a scene of peace. Shepherds find the infant Jesus and Mary and the infant lying in a manger. It has been re-enacted many times since Francis of Assisi started the tradition of the living "creche" on Christmas Eve in 1223. But for Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the rest of her family, this peaceful scene was perhaps but a short moment she could hold in her heart. Previously there had been the unexpected and unexplainable pregnancy, and the inopportune but necessary trip to Bethlehem while she was full term. Not to mention the birth itself, at which point they were all homeless.

And if we cross over into Matthew's gospel for a moment, soon Herod would try to murder this new-born Prince of Peace, and the Holy Family would flee and become refugees in a foreign land. Not exactly a peaceful life! Neither are our lives so filled with peace—at least on the outside.

St. Francis de Sales, in his Spiritual Conference on "Constancy," asks us to consider the great peace and serenity and heart shown by both Mary and Joseph. This newborn Son of God, born of this incredible woman and given the name "Abba" in Joseph, would learn as a child growing up how to maintain an inner peace amidst the earth-shattering disturbances of life. These parents of Jesus, the God-Man, knew that the secret of peace lies in the heart, and in the intimate relationship with the God who sees us as his beloved children.

And so, ask yourself, "How peaceful is my life right now?"

So come now—remain in peace; bear your sufferings in peace; wait in peace; and God, who is the God of peace, will bring about his glory to triumph in the midst of this human war.

- From a letter of St. Francis de Sales to Louise de Ballon AE 19.412

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Challenge of a New Year (January 1, 2003)

We are at the end of another year. Soon, this year will take its place among so many others that have come before. Time passes, the years come and go, and we come and go with them. Nevertheless, we must make a strong and sincere resolution that, if our Lord gives us the coming year, we will make a better use of it than the years that are past.

Let us walk with a renewed step in the service of God and one another. Let us renew our efforts to grow in our prayer and love.

Let us take great courage to earnestly labor and master ourselves, and to purify ourselves of those things which keep us from being more of who God calls us to be.

It is easy to begin a new year. It is not so easy to put our hands to the work that God expects of us during a new year. To begin the year without tending to our labors is to run the risk of allowing yet another year to slip by without any benefit to our soul. Don't let this happen to you; rather, consider how well you are making use of each and every present moment that God gives you.

We are growing older and drawing nearer to death every day. Our days, months and years flow on, ultimately coming to an end. How should we respond to this reality? Do what is good and hope in the Lord! Let us embrace our state of life in the best way we can. Let us employ the time that God gives us with great care. While we ultimately must depend and rely upon God's mercy, let us at the same time remember to do as much good as we can in the time that God gives us now.

So, let us begin this New Year in the name of our Lord. Let us resolve to do the best we can with what ever little we possess. While God wants only what we can do, God clearly expects us to do what we can. Therefore, let us begin by giving what is due to God and to one another: let us do what is good, and place our hope and confidence in God's love and compassion.

(Based upon an exhortation by St. Jane de Chantal given on the last Saturday of December, 1629. See the original and entire text in Frances Fremyot de Chantal: Her Exhortations, Conferences and Instructions. Westminster, MD: Newman Bookshop, 1947, page 100.)

Three Spiritual Maxims for the New Year (January 1, 2003)

In the beginning of the 1620s, the Sisters of the Visitation asked Francis de Sales to provide them with some additional guidelines for pursuing a life of devotion. Francis offered three 'laws' that he hoped would "be both useful and agreeable." These three spiritual maxims have been adapted from those originally outlined in St. Francis de Sales' Spiritual Conferences.

Maxim One: *Do all for God and nothing for yourself*

St. Francis de Sales reminds us that we are made by God, from God and for God. Our glory comes from our God-given dignity. Our glory will be perfectly expressed in our God-given destiny: life on high with Jesus Christ. On any given day it is easy to lose sight of this profound truth and to find our glory in our own projects and endeavors. To be sure, there is much work that God wants us to do in the state and stage of life in which we find ourselves, to work at being so united to Christ's power and promise in the lives of others. Doing what is right is its own reward. As for the glory, give that to one to whom it belongs.

Maxim Two: *Make good use of the little you have*

Loosing -- letting go -- is a part of life. Some of what we need to let go are things that we give away. Some of what we need to let go are things that are taken from us. There is a great paradox here. Sometimes it is only in losing something that we more deeply appreciate -- and use -- that which we still possess. Throughout the life-long process of letting go we can complain about that which is no more, or we -- while acknowledging our losses -- can continue to dream and work for that which still might be. Growth in devotion is not measured by how much we have or possess. In the hands of God, the quality of our lives is measured by how diligently, readily and frequently we make use of how much little - we have.

Maxim Three: *Be the same in sadness and joy*

Life is a mix of setback and success. Life has its measure of both agony and ecstasy. Life has its share of defeat and victory. A sure sign that we are growing in devotion is our ability to embrace both sadness and joy to the same extent. We can experience the ups and downs of life in a reasonable, balanced and even-tempered way. While we cannot contro

what happens to us, we can certainly control how we respond to what happens to us. Some folks are great losers very good winners. Some folks are great winners but terrible losers. Neither person is very pleasant to be around periods of time. Take the good with the bad. Mourn loss. Celebrate gain. Take as your motto the words of Winston Churchill: "Success is never final; failure is never fatal." In all things, be grateful for who you are and who God is to be.

May our practice of these maxims make us more "useful and agreeable" in our attempts to serve God and one another in the coming year.

Epiphany Of Our Lord (January 5, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"Then they opened their coffers and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

Salesian Perspective

We celebrate, in a sense, the *Salesian* manifestation of God this day. Jesus, in the form of an ordinary human person, is recognized as divine. Saint Jane de Chantal and Saint Francis de Sales both teach us that within the ordinary is the extraordinary. Many times the ministry we are called to is less than glamorous, e.g., taking out the trash, packing lunches for our children to take to school, or paying a visit to a sick friend or relative. Yet through such ordinary activities Christ is manifested to others as well as to ourselves.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians speaks of his ministry, and ours, of proclaiming the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Before and after this reading are scripture passages which mention gold, frankincense, and myrrh either explicitly or by implication. In Eastern medical practice to this very day, frankincense is used as a treatment for traumatic injury and blood stasis. Myrrh is often added to the frankincense in order to strengthen the treatment. Thus, the central theme about ministry is "sandwiched," so to speak, between treatments for the bruising we will most probably encounter as we live out the duties of our states in life.

The beginning texts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were most likely added to the written Gospel at a later date in order to help the reader understand the significance of the birth of Christ. The gift of gold is often interpreted as being symbolic of Christ's royal nature, the frankincense and myrrh seen as a harbinger of his death.

What a wonderful challenge today's solemnity offers us! It invites us to look beyond past and present wounds to the radiant light of Christ. Not only do we need to do this when dealing with others, we may need to do so even more when thinking about ourselves. Saint Margaret Mary experienced the heart of Christ burning with love for everyone, that includes ourselves too. Past emotional bruises and errors need to be burned away in the Light of Christ so that we can live more wholly in the now. The burning love of Christ, swaddled in Salesian optimism, us gently invites us to apply spiritual frankincense and myrrh to our world and ourselves; are we open to it?

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Baptism of the Lord (January 12, 2003)

Readings Is 55: 1-11 (Ps) Is 12: 2-3, 4bcd, 5-6 1 Jn 5: 1-9 Mk 1: 7-11

Suggested Emphasis

"I the Lord have called you for the victory of justice."

"Those of any nation who...act uprightly are acceptable to God."

Salesian Perspective

The account of Jesus' baptism ends with the sound of a voice from heaven, saying "This is my beloved son. My rests on him."

Why does God's favor rest upon Jesus? Because Jesus is Son of Justice. Jesus measures by God's standards in g others their due.

Isaiah tells us that God has called us, like Christ, "for the victory of justice" and, in the Acts of the Apostles, to ' uprightly." In everyday terms, what does it mean to work for God's justice, to act uprightly?

Consider the opposite of acting justly and uprightly: "We condemn every little thing in our neighbor and excuse ourselves of important things. We want to sell very high but to buy at bargain prices. We demand that the right t done in another's house but that mercy and generosity be granted to ours. We like to have things that we say tak good part but we are tender and touchy about what others say." (Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, Chapt its heart, injustice is about living a double standard, measuring the world with two weights: one to weigh everytl one's own advantage, and another to weigh everything to the disadvantage of others.

What makes our acts of injustice so difficult to identify is that they are seldom big; rather, they are frequent and easy to overlook. Writes St. Francis de Sales: "Self love can lead us and direct us into countless small yet dange of injustice and iniquity. Because they are little we are not on guard against them and because there are many of they are sure to cause us – and others – great injury."

Francis de Sales writes that just and upright people are, in short, reasonable people. They do not live a double st They are people of integrity. They follow the Golden Rule, treating others as they themselves would wish to be not expecting of others that which they themselves refuse to practice. Just and upright people measure the world only one weight: the love of God. "Be just and reasonable in your neighbor's place and your neighbor in yours,' Francis. "Live a generous, noble, courteous, royal, just and reasonable heart."

To the extent that we do this with one another each and every day, we grow as the "beloved sons and daughters God's favor will rest on us, as we make real the promise of God's justice to others.

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The Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (January 19, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

We all need help to respond to the Lord, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Salesian Perspective

Last week we heard in the Gospel reading as God affirmed Jesus' call: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am pleased." This week we hear the call given to more ordinary believers—Samuel, a young boy in 9th century BC and two disciples of John the Baptist.

There are so many wonderful phrases in the reading from First Samuel, and they are easy to relate to Salesian th Samuel seems to be an ordinary young boy, doing a form of service to an older person: ordinary, daily tasks. Bu moment the story begins, he's not even involved in service; he's sleeping. And it's Samuel who receives the cal

God, not the older, established prophet.

Samuel and Eli are sleeping in the temple where the ark, the presence of God, is. They don't need to "pray" to receive God's presence; it is in the place where they dwell. The Lord calls to Samuel, and his immediate response is "Here I am." But Samuel doesn't know who is calling. Misunderstood communication is something not unknown in our daily lives. Samuel wasn't familiar with the Lord, because the Lord hadn't revealed anything to him yet. But Eli was, and on a third time the light goes on for Eli; he gives the boy good advice, or "spiritual direction," and tells him to express the openness of his ears and heart.

In this week's Gospel passage, two of the disciples of John the Baptist get curious about Jesus and follow him. John the Baptist's words ("Behold the Lamb of God") and his action of baptizing Jesus that sends those disciples off; John the Baptist testifies as God calls him to, not to enhance his publicity ratings.

In a Salesian context, we reflect on these calls and on the helps we have to hear and respond. Both Samuel and John the Baptist and his disciples, and Jane and Francis were special people at the times of their calls, and their mutual assistance brought the knowledge of the Lord to people Israel and in post-Reformation Europe. But any person who listens to the Lord can help another listen and respond. The great joy of the Salesian tradition is that we claim that mutual assistance and encouragement as our special gift.

Michael de la Bedoyere, in his biography of Francis de Sales, describes the assistance that Francis and Jane gave each other: "[Jane de Chantal] would teach [Francis de Sales] truly to know himself, as he would teach her how best to live her spiritual vocation and genius. Between them, they would map out the way of spiritual perfection in its application to men and women of every kind according to the nature of their spiritual call."

This week includes some other events or calls of the Lord worthy of note. The Week of Prayer for Church Unity has begun, and our mutual listening for the Lord's call and responding to it can be brought to bear on this scandal of Christianity. We acknowledge Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday with a holiday on Monday, another prophet in who listened and proclaimed a call to set people free.

John, in letting the disciples go, and Samuel, in responding "Here I am," are both responding to the Lord; the responses are opposite, but each is called in his way. That we are called is a given; how we are called is for us to discern, with the help of our mentors and friends and our tradition. How we are to answer is illustrated in today's readings: "Here I am. Speak, for your servant is listening."

Spending some time reflecting on the stories of calls to other biblical persons (especially calls to women), to others, and to the people we live and work with can enliven our understanding of our own call and encourage us in our response.

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The Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (January 26, 2003)

Readings Jon 3: 1-5, 10 Ps 25: 4-9 1 Cor 7: 29-31 Mk 1: 14-20

Suggested Emphasis

"The world as we know it is passing away."

"This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand."

"Reform your lives and believe in the Good News!"

Salesian Perspective

“The world as we know it is passing away.”

Every person, every generation needs to come to grips with the fact that our lives are always changing. No matter how good things may have been in former times, or how good they may be right now, there is always more yet to come. Our security of “what is” needs to be open to the uncertainty of “what may come.”

Put another way, we need to constantly reform, refashion and renew our lives.

This goes against our grain. It’s so easy to cling to what we know. It’s so easy to believe that we’ve learned all we need to learn. It’s easy to think that there aren’t any more ways in which we can grow. We are tempted to say that we have learned and have grown enough.

Jesus invites us to believe in the Good News, that is, to believe in the power of God’s constant, unchanging love and to learn more about God, ourselves and one another. Jesus calls us to believe that the willingness to reform ourselves (with the help of the Holy Spirit) can help us to experience in the changing circumstances, events and relationships of our daily lives more of the justice, the freedom, the reconciliation and the peace that will be unchanging in heaven.

Be willing to change. Be willing to grow. Be willing to learn. Be willing to reform. Be willing to be transformed. Trust that the power of the Reign of God can help you to be more of who and how God calls you to be. Turn away convincingly from what is evil. Embrace more deeply what is good. In words and example, challenge and encourage another to do the same.

While the world as we know it is passing away, Jesus promises us that the best is yet to come. Together, you and I can make the best of what is yet to come a reality in our own day by recognizing the opportunities that God provides and every present moment our reformation, our transformation and our growth.

Believe in this Good News! Pass it on to others!

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Presentation of the Lord (February 2, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis from the Gospel of Luke 2:30, 32

“...for my eyes have seen your salvation... a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.”

Salesian Perspective

In her reflection in Living Faith, Elizabeth – Anne Stewart writes “...like all prophets, Simeon saw beyond the suffering. Even as he spoke two thousand years ago, Roman forces occupied the land and atrocities abounded. What he saw was the presence of God cradled in the palms of his hands. As he gave thanks, he was not so naïve as to imagine the Child would banish all suffering; rather, he knew that by embracing the suffering of the world, this Child would show us that there is always a possibility. ...Be our light in times of darkness, O Lord that we may shine with your love”

In Luke’s Gospel message, Jesus’ parents were faithful to the Law presenting him in the Temple. Devout Jews like Simeon accepted Jesus as God’s promise to all people: an inclusive Salvation opportunity.

Messianic Salvation is a “Beacon” shining before all nations, a Light that dissipates the darkness and enlightens the world. In the Light of his presence, there can be no neutrality, for he is the Light that reveals our innermost thoughts and feelings and is part of his Light.

Saint Francis de Sales was a model for us of the Light of Love and a burning Heart. He was a Light in his time that helped all persons to pursue a life of devotion in the state and stage of life in which they lived each day. His relationship with the Divine created a beacon of blessings through his writings, preachings and guidance, enabling us to strive for Light for others. To do this action, he stressed the need for our transformation from the inside out. De Sales writes

“For myself, Philothea, I cannot approve the methods of those who try to reform someone by beginning with outward things. On the contrary it seems to me that we ought to begin inside... Since the heart is the source of our action and the heart is so are they; whoever has Jesus Christ in their heart will soon have him in all outward ways.”

Our “temple” is in our hearts. Our light is how we live the gospel, even when we encounter suffering. Are we a Christian Light in our generation? Can we announce salvation through Jesus by our living action?

Sometimes we are too near-sighted and too hard of hearing to be truly in the presence of his Light. Someone has to open our eyes, ears and hearts beyond our own perceptions. Simeon recognizes in Jesus the Messiah promised long ago and has a need to trust in the fulfillment of the divine promises and see the Light in all peoples. St. Francis de Sales was a Light for us too. He was a Light who gave people the heart they needed to embrace life as it was and to dream about life as it should be.

Genuine encounter with Christ leaves us changed forever and impacts our choices, our motivations and our attitudes. Have we let this child into the temple of our hearts? **Live Jesus—Let Jesus Shine!**

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Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (February 9, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

Lord, how could you...?

Salesian Perspective

February is a difficult month. We are between festive seasons. Flu season has begun; the "Febs" afflict us. Today the Church presents us with the Book of Job as a beacon of light that leads us toward the Light of the World in a glow that often arrives at this time of year.

Job is part of "Wisdom Literature." It is a story the human author weaves about a man from the land of Uz (who apparently never actually existed) but will always enlighten us as a stepping stone into the mystery of the innocent sufferer and the place of possessions in our lives. The Book of Job raises the question: Why does God allow evil to happen in the world? Rabbi Harold Kushner used

Job's plight for his classic book [When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#).

God leads Job toward an attitude of humility. God does not have to justify to Job or to us either his actions or his interventions. God is mystery; we cannot comprehend all the whys and wherefores of God. Job ceased questioning when he came face to face with God's immensity and turned instead to simple faith and trust. Job finally said: "I am not worthy; what can I answer you? I put my hand over my mouth." Wisdom! God contents Job with his power and mystery.

In 2003 we are blessed with more than Job's story, more than what Rabbi Kushner can provide from his Jewish insights. We recognize Jesus as our Savior. Jesus does not give a final answer to Job's questions, but does reveal the truth to us. He corrects a faulty perception of gifts. St. Francis de Sales sheds the additional spiritual insight in a

"What goods have we which we have not received, and if we have received it, why should we take pride in it?"
(Introduction III, 5)

Jesus also broadens our understanding of suffering.

- Job thought that the world's goods were the indication of God's favor; their absence, a sign of God's disfavor. Job advances this understanding. His father allows rain to fall on the good and the bad. "Bad things" are not punishment for what we have done.
- Jesus did not heal everyone who was sick or raise every dead person to life. All our requests will not be answered as we might wish. We see Jesus' undeserved suffering; we hear: "Let it be done to me according to your word." If Jesus recognizes and accepts suffering even after agonizing prayer to his Father asking him to take the cup away - how can we expect that all our requests will be answered as we might like? His plan is beyond us. Jesus tells us: "I will be with you all days. . ." He will be with us in the midst of our trials and pain. He promises to send his Spirit, the Comforter.

Our anxious moments can be alleviated by a deeper awareness of God's power, loving presence, and wisdom in Christ. To Live Jesus with an interior humility.

Who of us has not gone through pain and in hindsight not seen personal growth? We, like Job, and later, Jesus, can weather the storms of suffering. We are transformed into a more faith-filled, trusting, and humble person in our relationship with our Father.

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Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (February 16, 2003)

Readings Lv 13: 1-2, 44-46 Ps 32: 1-2, 5, 11 1 Cor 10: 31-11: 1 Mk 1: 40-45

Suggested Emphasis

"They shall declare themselves unclean. They shall dwell apart, making their abode outside the camp."

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "Be cured."

Salesian Perspective

St. Francis de Sales wrote in his Introduction to the Devout Life: "There is scarcely anyone without some imperfection" (Part 3, Chapter 22)

We have a pretty good handle on the imperfections, vices, idiosyncrasies and even the sins of those with whom we play, we neighbor and we live each day.

Most days we overlook them. Some days we put up with them. Other days, we might even make excuses for them. Occasionally, we dwell on – even magnify – them.

Sometimes it is necessary to draw attention to things in other people that blemish their potential for happiness, holiness, and holiness. Sometimes we need to take the risk to name the sins, the faults and the wounds in others that prevent them from being more of who God calls them to be. Sometimes we need to reflect back to others those social, spiritual, psychological or relational sores that rob them of their full citizenship as sons and daughters of the living, loving, and saving God.

The Scriptures contrast two very different methods for doing this. One approach draws attention to others' sins in order to isolate them, ostracize them or distance them from the community. The other approach – Jesus' approach – is to draw them even more closely into the life of the community, to create a space in which the "unclean" can experience

strength, and a new lease on life.

As yourself the question: When you do draw attention to the imperfections, the warts, the blemishes of others, what do you do? To distance yourself from them? To embarrass them? To humiliate them? Or, are you reaching out, reaching to the heart of others? Is your goal to create a space of truth in which they can experience healing, forgiveness, reconciliation and strength? Do you intend it as an opportunity for a new beginning?

A footnote: before ever calling attention to the imperfections, the sins or the blemishes of others, take that most of first steps.

Be clear and unambiguous about your own sin and weakness. Be clear and unambiguous about your own need for healing and forgiveness. Be clear about your own need for friends who will not only tell you what you want to hear but who will sometimes have the courage to tell you what you need to hear.

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Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (February 23, 2003)

Readings Is 43: 18-19, 21-22, 24b-25 Ps 41: 2-5, 13-14 2 Cor 1: 18-22 Mk 2: 1-12

Suggested Emphasis

"Remember not the things of the past. The things of long ago, consider not. See, I am doing something new."

Salesian Perspective

We have lots to learn from past promises or pain. We have lots to learn from past triumphs or tragedies.

But we can't afford to live in the past. We need to keep moving forward. We need to keep growing. We need to look out for new insights, new lessons, new opportunities, new challenges, and new directions. In short, we need for how God invites us to become more of who God calls us to be with each new day.

We must live in the present. St. Francis de Sales wrote to the Duc de Bellegarde, a powerful courtier who served the palace of Henry IV and Louis XIII in Paris: "Keep your eyes steadfastly fixed on that blissful day of eternity toward which the course of years bears us on; the passing of years carry us stage by stage until we reach the end of the journey; meanwhile, in each present moment there is found a tiny kernel of the seed of all eternity; in our humble acts of prayer there lies hidden the prize of everlasting glory."

The practice of three virtues may go a long way in helping us to embrace the present, to fully live the newness of the present moment:

- Forgiveness – the process of letting go of hurtful things in the past.
- Gratitude – the process of thanking God for joyful things in the past.
- Hope – the belief that with God's grace, our efforts and the good will of others, the best in life – with all its ups and downs – is yet to come.

We catch a glimpse of the openness and freedom that living in the present makes possible in a letter that Francis wrote to his good friend and companion, Jane de Chantal on the eve of the new year in 1609: "The year that is passing about to be swallowed up in the gulf which has devoured all the rest. O how desirable is eternity in exchange for this passing state of uncertainty and change. May time continue to pass on, time with which we ourselves gradually pass as to be transformed into the glory of the children of God."

The seeds of eternity – the power of God’s renewing, transforming love –can be seen in the unfolding of each day, hour, and each present moment. May we not turn away our eyes by choosing to live in the past.

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Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (March 2, 2003)

Readings Hosea 2:16b,17b,21-22 2Corinthians 3:1b-6 Mark 2:18-22

Suggested Emphasis

"I will lure (you) into the desert and speak to (your) heart."

"You are our letter (of recommendation) written by the Spirit of the Living God."

"New wine is poured into fresh wineskins."

Salesian Perspective

What a wonderful lead-in to the upcoming Season of Renewal-(Lent/Easter/Pentecost)- we have been given in the Scriptures of the past Sunday and today! Last week we reflected on how we proclaim good news through forgiveness. This Sunday we are invited to share the gospel by feasting at appropriate times. The cause of our feasting is nothing other than the DIVINE INTIMACY to which God calls each and every one of us.

In the first reading we heard the Prophet Hosea echo this invitation: "I will lure you into the desert and speak to your heart." ...my heart...your heart. Since each of us has a unique relationship with God, each will be called in a special way, and will express and proclaim the fruit of this encounter with the Divine Bridegroom as no other can. Paul writes in the Letter to the Corinthians that we are God’s Letter...not words on a piece of paper. We must embody our experience. Our journey into intimacy with our God is so essential to keeping the message of God’s Love, Justice and Peace ever new. Each of us has the potential of being the fresh wineskin into which fresh wine for our day can be poured.

In his Treatise on the Love of God (Book 2, Chapter 7) St. Francis de Sales describes the Church, and thus each of us: *"The church is a garden with countless flowers. It is necessary that they should be of various sizes, various colors, various scents, and to sum up, various perfections. All of them have their value, their charm, and their color, and the assemblage of their differences all of them produce a beauty most pleasing and perfect."*

In recent months I had a unique opportunity to enter into a profoundly Sacred Moment of intimacy with my God. I would have imagined that it would be in the darkness of a hospital emergency room as I awaited the results of a scan of my brain. It was the first week of Advent, and from some deep place within me came the words of an ancient Advent hymn: "Soon and very Soon I am going to see the King..." From that same deep Center, without words, came the gift of Surrender and the Yes to all that was to follow. That moment of union and peace has sustained me through emergency surgery, recovery, and THIS precious moment.

In this Season of Renewal, this springtime in our Church, let us take advantage of the many opportunities to enter into prayerful intimacy with our God, so that each of us may enhance the Garden, which IS the People of God. The Kingdom of God is there; it is ours to respond in surprising and ordinary ways.

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Ash Wednesday (March 5, 2003)

Readings J1 2: 12-18 Ps 51: 3-6a, 12-14, 17 2 Cor 5:20-6:2 Mt 6: 1-6, 16-18

Suggested Emphasis

"When you fast, do not look glum like the hypocrites..."

Salesian Perspective

Lent is a time when each of us is challenged to recognize our need for conversion. We are invited to closely examine our relationship with God, ourselves and one another. Simply put, Lent asks us to name those sins, vices, weaknesses, and anything -- that prevent us from making real in thought, word and deeds our God-given dignity.

A popular way of ritualizing this inner journey is to "give up" something for Lent. Maybe you refrain from tobacco; others eschew alcohol; still others pass up all desserts. In short, we do without something we normally enjoy. Using traditional language, Lent is a time for fasting. Francis de Sales was no stranger to fasting or "giving up" for Lent. He endorsed the practice of fasting, provided that it meets three conditions.

First, our fasting "should be entire and universal." Our "giving up" cannot be limited to depriving our mouths of food or drink or other treats. Francis insists that, among other things, we should deprive our eyes of things that are "frivolous and unhealthy: we must deny our ears of "vain" talk or gossip: we should deny our tongue words that slander, accuse, or injure: we should give up "useless thoughts, vain memories and all the superfluous appetites and desires" of our senses. Second, our fasting should not be done for the eyes of others. Rather, our "giving up" is meant to be scrutinized by God alone. Third, all of our actions, including our fasting, serve only "to please God alone, to whom all honor and glory belong."

Fasting, however, is only half of the story. Lent, in its fullest expression is also a season for feasting! In their book *Sense of Sexuality*, (Doubleday 1989) Drs. Evelyn and James Whitehead remind us that "fasting, at its finest, is not solely punishment nor denial. We fast not only to avoid evils but to recapture forgotten goods." Put another way, fasting is fruitful only if we have some deeply valued 'yes' in our life." The arduous discipline of fasting contrasts with our feasting; we need something for which to fast.

That's right. Feasting requires no less discipline than fasting. The discipline of feasting celebrates well and heartily the God-given blessings that we enjoy without engaging in selfishness and excess.

Lent, then, is as much a matter of "doing" as it is "doing without". St. Francis de Sales writes in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*: "Both fasting and working mortify and discipline us. If the work you undertake contributes to the glory of God and to your own welfare, I much prefer that you should endure the discipline of working than that of fasting."

He continues: "One person may find it painful to fast, another to serve the sick, to visit prisoners, to hear confessions, to preach, to assist the needy, to pray, and to perform similar exercises. These latter pains have as much value as the former." Whether through fasting or feasting, turning away from sin or embracing virtue, these forty days of Lent are about our "insides": our heart, mind, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, hopes and fears. It is the journey of the soul as St. Francis says, "As for myself," says Francis de Sales, "it seems to me that we ought to begin with the interior."

God give us the grace to make a new beginning with these forty days....and with every day that follows thereafter.

First Sunday in Lent (March 9, 2003)

Readings Gn 9: 8-15 Ps 25: 4-9 1 Pt 3: 18-22 Mk 1: 12-15

Suggested Emphasis

"The Spirit sent Jesus out toward the desert. He stayed there for forty days, put to the test there by Satan."

Salesian Perspective

St. Matthew's Gospel provides details of the nature of the test that Jesus experienced in the desert: to be a different Messiah, to find a quicker or more spectacular way to win people over, to employ a one-shot way of doing God's will that would make everybody happy.

In other words, Jesus was tempted to be *someone other* than who God called him to be.

This test in the desert was simply the beginning. The temptation dogged Jesus every day of his ministry. The voices in all different shapes and sizes - expelled demons, Pharisees, Sadducees, family, friends, even some of his closest disciples. Screamed, whispered or shrieked the voices of temptation tried to dissuade Jesus from being himself, his focus, to abandon his mission, to turn away from his role in God's plan of salvation. Even as the life drained from his body upon the wood of Calvary, Jesus still heard the voices of temptation taunting, "You saved others, save yourself. Come down from that cross."

All of us are tempted to be someone other than who God calls us to be. Voices around us, voices within us attempt to convince us that we would be happier, healthier, more successful, more powerful and more persuasive if we were someone - anyone - other than who we are.

We are most like Jesus when we strive to be faithful to God's plan for us. We are most like Jesus when we are faithful to our unique role in God's plan of salvation for others. We are most like Jesus when we refuse the temptation to settle for less, to sell ourselves short, to look for the easier, the more convenient, or the more popular way of doing what is good, of doing what is just.

St. Francis de Sales' advice is on point: "Don't sow your desires in some else's garden; cultivate your own as best you can. Don't try to be someone other than who you are; rather, desire to be thoroughly who you are."

With God's help, and the encouragement of others, let us be who we are...and be that well. In the midst of the complexity of life, let us be true to ourselves.

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

Second Sunday in Lent (March 16, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis from the Book of Genesis

"Because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly."

Salesian Perspective

In our reading from Genesis, we see Abraham promised abundant blessings because he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. But elsewhere in Scripture we hear that it is not sacrifice God wants from us but a humble, contrite heart. God blessed Abraham because he emptied himself in order to receive God's blessings. Not only would he walk in the path God was showing him but Abraham was not going to hold back anything for himself.

In our reading from Romans, Paul tells us that love means never holding anything back. After all, even God did not hold back his own Son. Love means giving everything and holding on to nothing. Love can never be half way. It must be total and complete to be true love.

Jesus allows the apostles to glimpse this total love on Mount Tabor. In a rare moment, the three chosen ones saw the beloved Son of the Father as he truly is. They glimpsed love, as it is known in eternity, not the meager facsimile

know here on earth. And the Father himself told the Apostles to listen to this beloved Son.

We have embarked on our annual Lenten journey. We are already ten days into this season of conversion. Like , we are not called to sacrifice those we love. We are called to love them in God and for God. We are called to co love into that which will exist for all eternity.

The mystery of the Transfiguration is the mystery of conversion. Jesus did not appear in his glory to dazzle or nr Apostles. He appeared as he truly is to call them – and us – to conversion.

Saint Francis de Sales tell us, “What ought we not do or suffer in order to enjoy these unutterably pleasurable de The truth is shown us in today’s Gospel; for do you not see that Moses and Elias spoke and conversed very fami indeed with our transfigured Lord. Our felicity will not stop at this, my dear souls. It will pass farther, for we wi face to face and very clearly the divine Majesty, the essence of God, and the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. I vision and clear knowledge consists the essence of felicity.” Homily for the Second Sunday of Lent, February 20, 1622

We are called to give all to the Father as Abraham did so that we may enjoy abundant blessings. We will certain some of these blessings while on this earth. But more importantly, we will one day enjoy the greatest blessing o will be transfigured after the model of Christ for all eternity.

Sr. Susan Louise, OSFS, is Principal of Holy Cross Academy in Fredericksburg, Virginia.
She is also a member of the Advisory Board of the De Sales Spirituality Center.

Third Sunday in Lent (March 23, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

(I show) steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. Exodus 20:6

Salesian Perspective

It is not too difficult to relate the passage from Exodus which is our first reading for the Third Sunday of Lent to Salesian theme. How many times in his writings does Francis de Sales remind us that the Ten Commandments r for us the declared Will of God! They are to be obeyed, simply, thoroughly, and forever because God wills it so. together with the Commandments of the Church, the Counsels of the Gospel, and the Inspirations of the Holy Sp the signified Will of God. This Will is described by Francis as all holy, all good and he claims it is easy for us to love, and adore God’s most holy Will by making this aspiration our own: Your Will be done on earth as it is in l

There is also his teaching on the permissive Will of God. Francis explains that God’s Will in reality is one most and simple Will, but He prefers to call it by different names according to the various means by which we know i permissive Will, or the will of His good pleasure, deals with those things that must be accepted by us; those thin God permits in every dimension of our lives: our natural, civil, spiritual, and psychological lives. They form the the cross for us, and on that cross he exhorts us to open our arms in an embrace of love and submission as we ge patiently, contentedly accept whatever He sends us.

Today’s Gospel tells the story of the cleansing of the temple and in the telling we recognize no actual command signifying God’s Will being broken, but surely, we can see His permissive Will in action as Jesus accosts the m changers and demands that they leave His Father’s house which they have made into a trading center for the big of the day: the buying and selling of animals for sacrifice at the coming feast. Jesus was outraged at what he sav entered the sacred precincts. The outer court of the temple looked like a filthy stable; the noise of the bellowing must have been deafening, and the noisy shouts of the traders and money-changers only added to the din. He be, upturn the money tables and to drive the animals out of the temple. Shock waves reverberated through the area. challenged by the Pharisees: who gave Him the right, by what authority did He do these things? He was acting l

the Baptist, showing an attitude of complete independence toward the established authorities.

Jesus' only response to them was the cryptic: Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again. They at Him, reminded Him that it took forty-six years to build the temple and He said He could do it in three days! It was misunderstood and so did his followers. Because His mission was being challenged, Jesus offered a real and true proof, but this proof was to be recognized only many months later. At the moment it did nothing to satisfy the evil curiosity of His questioners. All of them remembered it later: the Pharisees to accuse Him, his disciples to believe in Him, and then they did recognize in His Resurrection the sign he had offered to the elders in the temple.

May it be our joy to place ourselves among the many who believed in Him during the Passover festival in Jerusalem; we may not be witnesses to the signs John tells us they saw Him working but we can be doers of the Will of God; we can recognize His good pleasure, His permissive Will in all that happens to us; we can suffer with Him when that is our lot and we can rejoice with Him when God's hand leads us to the glory of His Resurrection.

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of the Visitation Monastery in Wheeling, West Virginia.

Fourth Sunday in Lent (March 30, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from us; it is the gift of God... For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them." (Eph 2:8-10)

Salesian Perspective

Through various imaginative metaphors in his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales describes in detail the importance of love. The quest to love God and neighbor is the central goal of human life; it is our natural inclination. In turn, God the Lover longs for communion with his creation. In Book Two of this tome, he writes:

The sun's warm rays give life to all things; nature depends on the sun for fertility. God's goodness too gives life to the souls of all, inspires all hearts to love him; as with the sun, none can escape its burning heat. See, then, how deeply God longs for our love.

This warm love is a gift from God, which we receive without any merit of our own. In fact, although we fail at times by choosing sin, God has chosen to give us his only Son. Through the sacrifice of God's Son, we are shown this love in the most profound way. What an awesome gift! God is so merciful that despite our human faults, we are given the gift of salvation through Christ.

The reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians describes this infinite and loving mercy of God. During Lent, it is that we are reminded of the salvation given through Christ's death and resurrection. More importantly, we are given the reason – love. Christ Jesus is the love template that humanity follows as an example in our journey toward communion with God and each other: we are "his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus." This is echoed in today's Gospel reading from John: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" so that "the world might be saved through him" (John 17).

This salvation offered through Christ Jesus is cyclically tied to our journey of love. De Sales writes: For this reason, our good Jesus, whose blood paid our ransom, has an infinite longing for us to love him, so that we may be saved forever; he has a longing too for our salvation, so that we may love him forever...his love urges him to our salvation, and our love urges us to love him.

Therefore, God creates us out of love, and desires for our love in return. To help us respond to this invitation of love, God showers upon us many means of assistance, the greatest of which is salvation. This is the gift upon which to reflect and continue to move through Lent.

RESOURCES

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Fifth Sunday in Lent (April 6, 2003)

Readings Jer 31: 31-34 Ps 51: 3-4, 12-15 Heb 5: 7-9 Jn 12: 20-33

Suggested Emphasis

"We would all like to see Jesus."

"All, from the least to the greatest, shall know me, says the Lord."

Salesian Perspective

We would all like to see Jesus.

Where do we look for him? Up the sky? Far away places? Special people? Extraordinary experiences? Once-in-a-lifetime events?

Francis de Sales suggests that we start closer to home: "God is everywhere and in every thing. There is no place in this world in which God is not very really present. God is not only in the place in which you find yourself, but in a very special way, dwells in the depths of your heart." (Introduction to the Devout Life, II, 2)

If we want to see Jesus, we must first recognize him in ourselves: after all, we are created in God's – Christ's – and Holy Spirit's – image and likeness. Christ dwells in our minds, in our hearts, in our affections, attitudes, and our actions. Christ dwells in the midst of our daily responsibilities, successes and setbacks. Christ dwells in our spouses, children, parents, families, friends, neighbors, co-workers and classmates. Wherever we "are", there Jesus "is."

Lent is a season for sharpening our eyesight, for clearing our vision, for focusing our perception of a God who is always and all ways!

Lent is also a season in which we are reminded of a very special place in which we can see and experience Jesus. It is the place of asking for, receiving and granting forgiveness. As much as Jesus dwells in us because we simply – and peacefully – "are", Jesus is in a very real, tangible and repeatable way present to us in the experience of forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption.

Ask for the grace to see Jesus more clearly in your self. Ask for the vision to see Jesus in the events, circumstances and relationships of each and every day. Ask for the wisdom to recognize Jesus in the gift of life and the beauty of creation with all of its ups, downs and in between. Ask for the faith to know Jesus' presence in the gift of forgiveness.

Help others to see this same Jesus by modeling these truths in your own life. Be for and with others, like Jesus!

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion (April 13, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"He saved others; he cannot save himself."

Salesian Perspective

Francis de Sales invites us to think of the passion in terms of the love with which God embraced us. All Christ's suffering, his passion and death was for love of us. Opting for love of God is to opt for eternal life.

A young girl came home; 'Mommy, teacher taught us how much Jesus loves us.' The mother set aside her work about the good news of Jesus' love. Enthusiastically the little one replies: "He loves us this much", as she stretch arms in the shape of the cross.

This week invites us to reflect on that cruciformed expression of God's love. The Letter to the Philippians captures outpouring in the Incarnation of Jesus: 'he emptied himself...even to death on a cross.' We are not being invited upon the crucified in order to put ourselves on a guilt trip. De Sales invites us to think of the passion in terms of with which God embraces. The passion was for love of us. 'It is certain that on the tree of the Cross the heart of . beheld your heart and loved it.'

Today is the gateway to remembering that love.

The mission of Christ was to embrace our wounded nature, to be in solidarity with us. However He was not just present to us in our misery and sin but rather to deliver us from its muck and mire. Jesus embraces our frailty and triumphantly leads us from a shadowed existence to share his victory. The Easter vigil will bring this to a culmination when we are reminded: 'He has been raised, He is not here.' Through the paschal mystery not only are love and mingled, love and life are eternally sealed. Christ is not only wounded with us in love, Christ extends through the divine love triumph over death. Today is the procession that leads us to Calvary where we encounter the heart of this mount Salesian perspective is clear: the death and passion of Our Lord is the sweetest and most constraining that can animate our hearts in this mortal life. Out of love for us, Christ empties himself to give new life to his d

We are now enfleshed in Christ; we become the Christ who now walks in solidarity with all God's children. What he has done out of love for us, he calls us to do for others.

Rev. James Behan is an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales

Easter Vigil (April 19, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"If we have been united with him through likeness to his death, so shall we be through a like resurrection..."

Salesian Perspective

The death to which Paul refers is not limited to the death that Jesus experienced on the last day of his earthly life. The likeness to Jesus' death is not limited to the day that we draw our last breath. Truth is, we are called to share the death of Jesus every day of our lives. Truth is, death – letting go, giving in, letting in – is deeply imbedded in every dimension of our lives.

Listen to Francis de Sales' observations on this relationship between our lives – our loves – and the death of Jesus. The death and passion of our Lord is the sweetest and the most compelling motive that can animate our hearts in this

life. It is the very truth that mystical bees make their most excellent honey in the wounds of this 'lion of the tribe of Judah,' slain, pierced and rent upon the Mount of Calvary. The children of the cross glory in this, their wondrous mystery which the world does 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, Book 12, Chapter 13)

This is the greatest mystery of our faith: where there is decay, there is the promise of rejuvenation; where there is death, there is the promise of healing; where there is imprisonment, there is the promise of freedom; where there is adversity, there is the promise of sobriety; where there is emptiness, there is the promise of abundance; where there is ignorance, there is the promise of understanding; where there is failure, there is the promise of success; where there is disaster, there is the promise of redemption; where there is loss, there is the promise of being found.

Where there is death, there is the promise of life.

Losing, finding; falling behind, moving forward; feeling alone, being together...these and so many experiences are the rhythm of life, the dance of fasting and feasting, the dance of dying and rising.

"All love that does not take its origin from the Savior's passion is foolish and perilous. Unhappy is death without the Savior's love; unhappy is love without the Savior's death. Love and death are so mingled in the Savior's passion that we cannot have the one in our hearts without the other. Upon Calvary we cannot have life without love, or love without the Redeemer's death. Except there, all is either eternal death or eternal love. All Christian wisdom consists in choosing rightly." (*Ibid*)

As we struggle to embrace the falling and rising tides of daily living, may God give us the grace and the courage to choose rightly and so to know his love not only in the next life, but also here, already, in this life.

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

Easter Sunday (April 20, 2003)

Readings Acts 10:34a, 37-43 Colossians 3:1-4 John 20:1-9

Suggested Emphasis

"Seek what is above, where Christ is."

Salesian Perspective

Live, Jesus, live. Your death proves

The great power of heavenly love...

We love or we die. We die and we love. We die to all other loves in order to live to Jesus' love. Savior of our souls, we sing forever, VIVE, Jesus! Live, Jesus, whom I love! Reign forever. Amen. (*Treatise XII, 13*) (*Living Love, by Bernard Bangley*)

In the Letter of St. Paul to the Colossians, Paul directs us to "seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth." A tall order when most of us find ourselves so involved in the world, sometimes buried, in the muck of the earth.

Jesus rose above that, rose from the dead. What are we to do?

Mary of Magdala was there, at the cross. In many ways, she died with Him that day, at the foot of the cross. But she refused to stay buried in her own pain. She looked beyond it, above it. She went to the tomb where she saw the stone removed and then ran to tell the others. Later, she saw Him, and though at first she did not understand, she believed.

“Live Jesus, whom I love!” She believed because her love was stronger than death. It seems so hard to live that lose the people around us that make up our life and with those deaths we lose a part of ourselves. Still, Jesus lives it is in this living on that we have hope, that we have life. “We die to all other loves in order to live to Jesus’ love.”

When Paul tells us to seek what is above, where Christ is...we know in our hearts this is how Christ’s life continues within us and through us, His chosen, that His life touches those around us. It is not enough for us to simply stay in love but He commands us to live it, to show it, to teach it. Easter Sunday and the Holy days that lead to it are a result of the new life given to us through Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is in each of us and all of us that this new life lives. “I wish therefore to engrave and inscribe in your heart, before everything else, this holy and sacred maxim: LIVE TO JESUS! (Introd.) When another person encounters me...do they have the experience of New Life, the experience of being alive? If Jesus is in my heart, he will be in every part of me...my hair, mouth, face, feet, “Anyone who has Jesus in his heart will have Him soon after in all of his exterior actions.” (Introd.).

Live Jesus is our hope, our request, fulfilled in the Resurrection, Jesus alive for us. It gives us reason to celebrate more days. Live Jesus is also His request of us, live who I am. It gives us a lifetime of loving service to live out.

Joanne Kinney is Administrator of DeSales Resources and Ministries in Lewiston, NY.

The Second Sunday of Easter (April 27, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"And Jesus came through locked doors."

Salesian Perspective

It’s unfair to defame a man’s entire character because of a sin we know he committed. (*Intr.* III, 29). It’s strange that we keep calling St. Thomas, “Doubting Thomas” despite the heroism we know about him from the gospels and tradition. The one thing we keep remembering is a single momentary hesitation in a time of pain and hurt. Talk about holding a grudge against somebody, and for two thousand years no less?

Why wasn’t Thomas in the upper room on Easter Sunday night? Well, who wants to hang around a bunch of loss and disappointment with those we love and trusted often isolates us. We tend to withdraw or retreat inside ourselves to nurse our wounds or avoid further disappointment. It’s a self-preservation response, whether in a family or in the world; it only intensifies our loneliness. At some point one must break out of it.

So, Thomas decided to return, but he could not share the giddy enthusiasm he was greeted with. He had learned to trust them or rely on their emotional postures. He returned, but now even more isolated, excluded from the joy they were talking about. If they were joyful, he would have not part of it.

It was then that Jesus came, through closed doors and through a closed mind and a closed heart.

Jesus didn’t scold Thomas for his behavior, nor for listening to Peter (the pope, after all). Jesus took Thomas where he was, as He had done for the others and as He does for us. “Touch my hands and side? Sure. If that’s where you are, Thomas, then that’s where I’ll find you.” And in doing that, Thomas recognized he was in the presence of the Jesus he had always known, and the merciful goodness Jesus had always spoken of as His father.

In this he found far more than what he felt he had lost: “My Lord and My God.”

Spring is upon us, dear friends. Earth itself tells the story, as in e.e. cummings’ poem, “spring.”
when more than was lost has been found/has been found
and having means giving/ and giving means living
and keeping means winter and darkness and cringing

then it is spring
o then it is spring

Thomas knew that keeping was winter/ and darkness/ and cringing. / He discovered the miracle of life giving, the giving Jesus, and he became its apostle. And it was spring. O, then it was spring.

Fr. James Cryan is Provincial superior of the Toledo-Detroit Province

Third Sunday of Easter (May 4, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"Why are you troubled?"

"Peace be with you."

Salesian Perspective

It is no secret that we live in upsetting times. Our newspapers and our television screens seem to give us a daily troubling news. If it is not the armed conflict in the mid-east, it is the threat of terrorism, or it is our shrinking economy all of which can easily raise the level of anxiety in our lives. Living in the 21st century is often a stressful experience. Individuals and families are forced to deal with so many agendas at the same time that it is easy to feel overwhelmed.

When Jesus stood in the midst of his apostles and wished them peace, it was to comfort and to reassure them that he really was with them-that he was not a ghost. The whole experience of the violent death of Jesus had to be a traumatic experience for those who loved him the most. Now there were rumors that some had seen Jesus raised from the dead. Could this possibly be true? The apostles certainly needed reassurance and it is precisely for this reason that he spoke peace to them.

Being troubled and not being at peace with oneself can be a very unsettling and damaging experience for any individual. The trouble can take on a life of its own and upset set us so that we cannot focus on the things that are important in our life.

Saint Francis de Sales believes that anxiety is a very serious condition. "With the single exception of sin, anxiety is the greatest evil that can happen to a soul. If our heart is inwardly troubled and disturbed it loses both the strength and the means to maintain the virtues it had acquired and the means to resist temptation." (Introduction to the Devout Life, IV, 10)

How then do we maintain our peace of mind and soul in the midst of trouble? St. Francis recommends that we approach our life in a calm and gentle way. Place yourself in the presence of God, asking for his guiding hand to lead you through your present trouble to a state of peace of mind. We cannot eliminate troubles; the secret is how we deal with troubles. If they do not overly upset us and cause us to lose our peace of mind.

Jesus has promised us that he would always be with us. He would never leave us orphans no matter what rages around us. Listen to the words of Jesus to the apostles: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in me."

Our faith will sustain us if we place our trust and confidence in God whose peace will always reign in our hearts.

John Fallon, OSFS, is president of St. Mary High School in Stockton, California.

Fourth Sunday of Easter (May 11, 2003)

Salesian Perspective

No one likes a show off, right? Worse yet, those with the authority and thus power do not like some new guy to them up. Peter seems to have caught the attention and dismay of those in power by curing a cripple. No one doubt healing occurred; they were concerned how it occurred, or more accurately, by whose power. Further, Peter did cure the cripple he healed him meaning from a first century Mediterranean biblical culture, that he restored meaning to the man's life. Recall that Peter repeats by what means was he "saved." Talk about giving meaning to life! Thus about a power struggle.

For all of Peter's boldness and weaknesses he is quick to give credit where credit is due, that is, the power to heal from the "name of Jesus the Nazarene whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead; in His name this man was healed before you healed." Through our lenses this is a no brainer: we know salvation is God's work. But, what might Peter have felt in this scene in light of the fact that Peter himself had "rejected the cornerstone?" Was there anyone in the crowd that overheard Peter deny Jesus?

In other words, how did Peter grow from rejecting Jesus to preaching boldly about Him? I can hear our answer in unison, the Holy Spirit! No, no, we're not getting off THAT easy. Sure it was by the power of the Holy Spirit but did the Holy Spirit work in Peter, that is the question that I think we need to delve into so that we too can become our proclamation of Jesus the Christ.

We've all heard it said, and we certainly give intellectual assent to the idea that we cannot get to the joy of Easter Resurrection without going through the suffering of Good Friday. How did Peter go through his Good Friday in order to get to his Easter Sunday? How can his experience help us in our reluctant progression through Good Friday to Easter Sunday?

The answer begins with admitting our sin. Peter denied Jesus just as we deny him countless times when we put our own ideas and ideas ahead of God's (recall Jesus telling Peter that he is thinking as man and not like God) and in so doing we sin. When we are enraged yet fearful as we become aware of injustices and retreat into the comfort of our rationalizations, individualism, nationalism or complacency and ignore the truth (Jesus is the Truth?) we sin. So what brought Peter from his hiding place into the light of Truth? In other words, how exactly did the Holy Spirit get through to him and how does the Holy Spirit get through to us?

We come to a gradual awareness of our sin. We acknowledge that sin. We allow ourselves to feel the pain of deep contrition (Peter wept) for sin. We realize our dependence on God. We confess. We feel the forgiveness and mercy of God. We change.

Francis de Sales speaks to this in the Introduction to the Devout Life when he speaks of God's compassion and our capacity for humility. Francis writes, "Assuredly nothing can so humble us before the compassion of God as the abundance of His mercies; nothing so humbles us before His justice as the abundance of our misdeeds. Let us recall upon all He has done for us, and all we have done against Him; and as we count over our sins in detail, even so let us count over His mercies."

This is the point. If we managed to get through Lent without "counting our sins in detail" this excerpt from the Acts of the Apostles is showing us the effect of what happens when we humble ourselves before the compassion of God. It changes us. Let me be more accurate, the Holy Spirit changes us. That's what I see in this first Reading which begins with "Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit...."

Loretta Bedner is Regional Director of the De Sales Spirituality Center for the Diocese of Charlotte, NC.

Fifth Sunday of Easter (May 18, 2003)

Readings Acts 9: 26-31 Ps 22: 26-27, 28, 30, 31-32 1 Jn 3: 18-24 Jn 15: 1-8

Suggested Emphasis

"We are to believe in the name of his son, Jesus Christ, and are to love one another as he commanded us. Those who keep his commandments remain in him and he in them."

Salesian Perspective

The scripture passage for today is part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples, which takes up several chapters of the gospel of John. In these words Jesus is communicating to his disciples the most important things he wants them to remember. In a powerful and beautiful extended metaphor, Jesus speaks of himself as the vine and his disciples as the branches. He tells them that they must tie themselves closely to him. In order to be healthy, fruit-bearing branches they must be willing to be trimmed clean of those growths that keep them from bearing fruit. Above all, they must remain connected to the vine. If they become separated from the vine, they can produce no fruit. They will become withered and dry branches, good for nothing but to be burnt.

Jesus makes it clear that the disciples already have been given what they need. They have heard the words he has spoken to them. If they believe the words of life that Jesus has shared with them, if they make his words part of their lives, they will live in him and he will live in them. Hearing the word is the first essential step. But it is only the first step. Living the word, absorbing it, making it an integral part of one's life, must happen if one is truly to thrive as a disciple of Jesus. This is as true for us today as it was for the disciples to whom Jesus spoke and with whom he lived while here on earth.

We, too, have been given God's word. Like the disciples, we too are called to live in Jesus, or to live Jesus, as Fr. John Paul Sales said, as we go about our daily tasks. And what is the fruit we are supposed to produce? Our fruit is a life in the love of Christ, a life lived in a way that shows our brothers and sisters that we really believe what Jesus told us. Our life marked by patience and kindness and gentleness and humility.

The way we know that we are living in Jesus and that he is living in us is that we are keeping his commandment called to love "in deed and in truth and not merely talk about it." We can and should read the scriptures and other spiritual books. We can and should meditate on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We can and should say prayers and make use of the sacraments of the Church. In the end, however, it is how we treat our brothers and sisters that will tell the story. If our words are not supported by our deeds, they are empty and barren words, good for nothing.

If we talk about the forgiveness of Jesus, but hang on to that grudge against Aunt Sally for spoiling that Christmas ten years ago, we are not living Jesus. If we harbor resentment in our hearts against the colleague that got the promotion we wanted, we are not living Jesus. If we refuse to acknowledge addictive behavior and get help for it, we are not living Jesus. If we delight in gossiping about our neighbor's misfortunes or weaknesses, we have some pruning and trimming to do before we can bear fruit in the name of Jesus.

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Sixth Sunday of Easter (May 25, 2003)

Readings Acts 10: 25-26, 34-35, 44-48 Ps 98: 1-4 1 Jn 4: 7-10 Jn 15: 9-17

Suggested Emphasis

"Love one another as I have loved you."

Salesian Perspective

Jesus taught us about a type of love that is very different from the love we often experience in the world. By His words and by His deeds, He showed us how the Trinity Itself loves. This love is a self-emptying love, a self-sacrificial love so focused on the other that the self is forgotten. In the great Paschal mystery, we see Jesus so absorbed in the Father that He willingly sacrificed His very self for this love. His love of the Father's will is all that matters.

St. Francis de Sales is a spiritual master in the school of this love. His great work, Treatise on the Love of God, is a journey into the very heart of the love of the Trinity. At the very end of this two-volume work, Francis reaches the summit. For Francis, this is the true academy of love. When the human will surrenders itself to the will of the Father in a self-donation, love blossoms. Nothing enflames the human heart as this act of self-emptying love.

You may ask how St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal can be known for developing a philosophy of life that is optimistic, gentle, humble, and caring, if it is centered on Calvary. How do joyful friendship and devotion spring from such a source? Yet, this is exactly what we celebrate today. Easter, the Resurrection, the new life promised by God comes to us when we follow this path. While we will always pass through Calvary, Jesus has shown us that the true end of sacrificial love is a sharing in the very life of the Trinity Itself. This life, the true destiny of the human spirit, is that which never ends.

We don't have to look far to locate opportunities for self-sacrificial love. As St. Francis de Sales knew so well, they are present in every walk of life and in every situation of life. They come in small, medium, and large. The daily desire and ability to embrace them is a key to holiness. Let us listen to Jesus: "All this I tell you that my joy may be yours and your joy may be complete."

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

Ascension of the Lord (May 29, 2003 or June 1, 2003)

Readings Acts 1: 1-11 Ps 47: 2-3, 6-9, Eph 1: 17-23 or Eph 4: 1-13 or 4: 1-7, 11-13 Mk 16: 15-20

Suggested Emphasis

"Go, make disciples of all nations."

Salesian Perspective

In speaking on the mystery of the Ascension of Our Lord, Francis de Sales wrote: "We forsake our merely human order to live a loftier life above ourselves. We hide all this new life in God with Jesus Christ who alone sees it, lives it, and gives it. Our new life is heavenly love, which vivifies and animates our soul, and this love is wholly hidden in the things of God with Jesus Christ. As the sacred words of the Gospel say, after Jesus had shown himself for a while to his 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 our soul. Therefore our life is hidden in God with Jesus Christ, and when Jesus who is our love and therefore our spiritual Father appears on the Day of Judgment, we shall also appear with him in glory. That is, Jesus Christ, our love, will glorify us by communicating to us his own joy and splendor." (Treatise on the Love of God, Book VII, Chapter 6)

Our life is indeed hidden in God. The deepest reality of who we are is known only to God. Still, for Francis de Sales, living a life hidden in God is not the same as keeping that life a secret: it is about giving witness to the deepest truth of who we are – and who God is – by the quality of our relationships with one another. Appropriate, then, that Francis de Sales calls us to practice the hidden virtues, "those little, humble virtues which grow like flowers at the foot of the cross: helping the poor, visiting the sick and taking care of your family, with all the tasks that go with such things and that useful diligence that will not allow you to stand idle." (Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, Chapter 35)

Through the Ascension, Jesus has been removed from our sight: at least, from the grasp of our physical sight. Nevertheless, the same authority that Jesus claimed from his Father is given to us by virtue of our creation and confirmed in our baptism. We are called to continue the work that Jesus began, that is, to make disciples – followers, believers – of all nations. We are called to be convincing signs of the ongoing redemptive and challenging activity of the triumph of Christ, not in the simple, ordinary and everyday tasks of everyday life.

Paradoxically, to the extent that we are faithful to practicing the little, the hidden virtues that grow “at the foot of the cross” Jesus is no longer hidden: he becomes visible in our love, our concern, our pursuit of justice, our promotion of peace, our willingness to forgive, our attempts at healing.

What could be a more powerful – and convincing – way of making disciples of all nations?

Or, at least the people with whom we interact every day.

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

Ascension of Our Lord (June 1, 2003)

Readings Acts 1: 1-11 Ps 47: 2-3, 6-9, Eph 1: 17-23 or Eph 4: 1-13 or 4: 1-7, 11-13 Mk 16: 15-20

Suggested Emphasis

"Go, make disciples of all nations."

Salesian Perspective

In speaking on the mystery of the Ascension of Our Lord, Francis de Sales wrote: “We forsake our merely human order to live a loftier life above ourselves. We hide all this new life in God with Jesus Christ who alone sees it, and gives it. Our new life is heavenly love, which vivifies and animates our soul, and this love is wholly hidden in the things of God with Jesus Christ. As the sacred words of the Gospel say, after Jesus had shown himself for a while to his 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 our soul. Therefore our life is hidden in God with Jesus Christ, and when Jesus who is our love and therefore our spiritual Father appear on the Day of Judgment, we shall also appear with him in glory. That is, Jesus Christ, our love, will glorify us by communicating to us his own joy and splendor.” (Treatise on the Love of God, Book VII, Chapter 6)

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Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

7th Sunday of Easter (June 1, 2003)

Readings Acts 1: 15-17, 20 a, 20c-26 Ps 103: 1-2, 11-12, 19-20 1 Jn 4: 11-16 Jn 17: 11b-19

Suggested Emphasis

"I consecrate myself for their sakes now, that they may be consecrated in truth."

Salesian Perspective

For the past six weeks we have been observing the great Sunday of Easter, which lasts 50 days, culminating in the feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and our Blessed Mother and upon us, in our presence.

Christ is praying to his Father in the Gospel narrative for this 7th Sunday of Easter (John 17: 16-19) that we may be one. He prays that God may protect us and guard us from the evil one: "Consecrate them...I consecrate myself for their sakes now, that they may be consecrated in truth."

The scene we go back to in our minds is the Last Supper. We are all in the upper room. Jesus wants us to experience the joy of being one body, upholding one another in love whatever the circumstances.

Jesus prays that his disciples will see through the world's illusions. By arming themselves with God's word, they can outwit the evil one who seeks to separate them from the Father's protection. Our primary responsibility as Christians is to share the love of God that is within us. To share this love, we must see beyond the ways of the world and remain faithful to God's plan and ways.

What we Christians need in our spiritual life is what St. Francis de Sales reduced to two words in a motto he chose for himself as a youth: NON EXCIDET. They are words of determination. "I will not fall away from my original purpose"...would be a fuller translation, or "I will not fall down on the job." "I will not lose courage." Francis de Sales was faithful to his chosen motto. He stuck to his books and to the practice of virtue. As a result he became very learned and very close to God or "sanctified"... "made holy" as a result of his industry and pertinacity (his "stick-to-it" quality).

The entire secret of his sanctity escaped from his great heart when he said: "If I knew that there was a single fiber in my heart that was not completely saturated with the love of God, I would immediately pluck it out." St. Francis de Sales knew well what a person needs most in life, i.e. firmness of character.

"May we who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit" (Eucharistic Prayer II).

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
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Pentecost (June 8, 2003)

Readings Acts 2: 1-11 Ps 104: 1ab, 24ac, 29bc-30, 31, 34 1 Cor 12: 3b-7, 12-13 or Gal 5: 16-25 Jn 19: 15: 26-27; 16: 12-15

Suggested Emphasis

"Each of us hears them speaking in our own tongue about the marvels that God has accomplished."

Salesian Perspective

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 their core. They were speaking from their 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.

Communicating is often easier said than done. We misunderstand one another. We presume to know what other people are thinking or feeling. We use the same words for which we have different meanings. We have different ways of seeing the same thing. We hear, but we fail to listen. We are always talking, but we so seldom share something of the soul.

St. Francis de Sales tells us that the Holy Spirit comes to inflame the hearts of believers. When we speak and listen, our hearts are 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, sin gives way to salvation.

How might you need to speak the language of love today?

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
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Feast of the Holy Trinity (June 15, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

Salesian Perspective

Ask yourself, as Moses did: "Did anything so great ever happen before?" We hear Moses remind the Israelites that God has revealed the Divine Presence in many wonderful ways: from creation through the great signs of divine power done for God's people during the Exodus. God lovingly gave the chosen people commandments to live by and the promise of a land where they would live long and prosperous lives.

Our Triune God continued to love his people. The Father sent the Son, Jesus, to dwell among us. And Jesus died to save us from our sins. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit as God's abiding Presence in us and among us. God sang in love and made us adopted children, brothers and sisters of Jesus. We have "received the Spirit of adoption, through whom we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" In prayer, Jesus taught us to approach God and call him "Father."

As adopted children, co-heirs with Jesus, we have the right to inherit the promised reign of God. The Spirit of God is always with us, enabling us to bear our sufferings with Jesus, so that we may also be glorified with Jesus.

St. Francis de Sales describes for us our promised eternal inheritance. "We will see face to face and very clearly

Divine Majesty, the essence of God, and the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. ... There we will understand and participate in those adorable conversations and divine colloquies which take place between the Father, Son and Spirit.” (Sermons for Lent, 1622, p. 63)

Ask yourself again: “Has anything so great ever happened before?”

De Sales encourages us: “Note well how ardently God desires us to be His, since to this end He has made Himself entirely ours. He gives us both His death and His life; His life so that we may be freed from eternal death; His death so that we can enjoy eternal life. Let us live in peace, then, and serve God so as to be His in this mortal life and still in life eternal.” (Treatise 3. 5)

All praise and honor to you: Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

Michael Donovan, OSFS, is Retreat Director at the De Sales Spirituality Center, Childs, MD.

Body and Blood of Christ (June 22, 2003)

Readings Ex 24: 3-8 Ps 116: 12-13, 15-18 Heb 9: 11-15 Mk 14: 12-16, 22-26

Suggested Emphasis

"Do this in memory of me."

Salesian Perspective

Eucharist – a word that literally means *thanksgiving* – is the central celebration of the Christian community. It speaks volumes of who God is in our lives. It speaks volumes of who we are called to be in the lives of one another.

Eucharist celebrates the truth that God so loves us that God sent Jesus to be our redeemer. Eucharist celebrates the truth that God so loves us that God allowed Jesus to be body broken and blood poured out for us. Eucharist celebrates the truth that God loves us so much that the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead that we might share in the power and promise of eternal life.

Eucharistic Prayer III for Children says it this way: Jesus “brought us the good news of life to be lived with you in heaven. He showed us the way to that life here on earth; the way of love...He now brings us together to one table and asks us to do what he did.”

Eucharistic Prayer II for Reconciliation tells us that Jesus “has entrusted to us this pledge of his love.” Eucharist celebrates the truth that we are called to do more than simply receive the body and blood of Christ. Eucharist celebrates the truth that we are the body and blood of Christ for one another. Eucharist celebrates the truth that we are called to allow ourselves to be broken and poured out for others, to spend our lives in the pursuit of justice, peace, reconciliation, healing, freedom, life and love.

We are called to proclaim the death of the Lord in our willingness to be bread and wine for others. We are called to proclaim the death of the Lord – the power of the Lord – the promise of the Lord – in our willingness to lay down our lives, our talents and our efforts to continue the redeeming, saving work that Jesus began.

We demonstrate our Eucharistic dignity and destiny when we follow Jesus’ command to “do this in memory” of Him not only by celebrating Eucharist on the first day of the week, but by being Eucharist for one another, every day of our lives by feeding, nourishing and forgiving one another.

Let us be Eucharist for one another. Let us feed, nourish and forgive...in memory of him...in fellowship with one another.\

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

Peter and Paul, Apostles (June 29, 2003)

Readings Acts 3: 1-10 Ps 19: 2-5 Gal 1: 11-20 Jn 21: 15-19

Suggested Emphasis

"Their message goes out through all the earth."

Salesian Perspective

Of Saint Peter, Francis de Sales wrote: "St. Peter was chosen to be the chief of the Apostles, although he was 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." (Con 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 his master's company he alone takes his sword in strikes out with it? Yet a little afterwards among ordinary people he is so cowardly that at the mere word of a superior he denies and detests his master." (Book X, Chapter 9, p, 167)

Let's leave some room for St. Paul, too, shall we? "He fights for all people, he pours forth prayers for all people passionately jealous in behalf of all people, he is on fire for all people. Yes, he even dared more than this for '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 one rebellious to God and the other obedient to God." (Stopp, Selected Letters, page 224.)

Indeed, their message – as we see as clearly in their lives as we hear in their words – continues to go out through the earth. And this message could not be any clearer or more relevant now than it was nearly 200 years ago: "God chooses the weak and makes them strong in bearing witness..." (Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer: Martyrs)

God chooses the weak and makes them strong in bearing witness to the power and promise of his love. God chooses Peter and Paul in their time to be heralds of the Good News.

God chooses us, in our time. The Lord chooses us as we are – imperfect, cracks, warts and all – and makes us so strong, beautiful, powerful and passionate, for God...and for one another.

Let God's message – and yours – go out through all the earth, especially to those with whom you share life ever

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14th Sunday In Ordinary Time (July 6, 2003)

Readings Ez 2:2-5 Ps 123:1-4 2 Cor 12: 7-10 Mk 6: 1-6

Suggested Emphasis

"A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house."

Salesian Perspective

The account in today's Gospel is but one of many episodes in which Jesus experienced rejection: people "took offense at him because of his dedication and devotion to doing God's Will in his own life. So strong was this resistance to rejection in his native place that "he was not able to perform any mighty deed" there.

The temptation that Jesus faced – the temptation we all face – is to be more concerned about being accepted by others than to stick to our convictions when confronted by rejection. We are tempted to dilute the truth, to lower our standards to avoid anything that "rocks the boat." We are tempted to win friends at all costs, but we lose ourselves in the process.

St. Francis de Sales, the gentleman saint, was a man who tried his best to speak and live the truth of the Gospel in a humble, gentle and friendly way. For all his powers of persuasion, though, he, too, experienced rejection. In his Introduction to the Devout Life he writes: "As soon as people see that you wish to follow a devout life they are showered with a thousand darts of mockery and detraction at you. The most slanderous of them will slander your devotion as hypocrisy and trickery. Your friends will raise a lot of objections which they consider very prudent and charitable: they will tell you that you will become depressed, lose your reputation in the world, become unbearable, 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." (Part IV, Chapter 1)

Ouch! Seems (by some standards) that the Good News is not always so good for the folks who try to live it!

To be sure, we sometimes need to look for the kernels of truth that may be contained in criticism and rejection. Are we arrogant? Are we strident? Are we too pushy or stubborn? Is it really God's Will that we promote, or our own? If our conscience is clear, how do we deal with rejection?

Francis de Sales' advises: "Be firm in your purposes and unswerving in your resolutions. Perseverance will prove whether you are sincerely sacrificing yourself to God and dedicating yourself to living a devout life." He concludes: "The world may hold us to be fools." Like Jesus, rejection is a price – however painful – that we must sometimes be willing to pay.

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
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15th Sunday In Ordinary Time (July 13, 2003)

Readings Am 7: 12-15 Ps 85: 9-14 Eph 1: 3-14 or 1: 3-10 Mk 6: 7-13

Suggested Emphasis

"The Lord took me from following the flock, and said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel."

"In Him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things, according to the intention of his will, so that we might exist for the praise of his glory we who first hoped in Christ."

Salesian Perspective

St. Francis de Sales once traveled to Bellevaux with a young priest where he relived his first days as a missionary in the Chablais. The residents were very timid and wary. The two could not get any lodging, no wine, no seats to sit or eat poor bread for which they paid enormously - a little cheese, a little water, having no table other than the ground and no tablecloth other than their own cloaks.

Francis said: "Here is the real apostolic life, the life where one can imitate in some fashion the poverty of Jesus Christ and his Apostles. I am accustomed to this because for two or three years I experienced the same cruelty from the residents in various villages." Even with these setbacks, or because of them, Francis loved the people whose passions he was. He gave everyone a fraternal welcome and led them in apostolic generosity which he himself practiced. He practiced: "It is better to be humble with the poor than to share booty with the proud." (Proverbs 16: 19) He knew the apostolic spirit: "He is close to the broken-hearted; he soothes the dejected spirit." (Proverbs 33:19)

Francis listened to God's voice and added his own to the Lord's. His keen intellect and educational background helped him how to argue, yet he was able to turn aside hatred. Francis had a great desire to debate the Protestant ministers, but few took up the challenge. A few in his audience secretly took notes from his sermons, copied them, and passed them around Geneva. There was little response at first, but later there came great and many conversions.

One can do a great deal in his or her own style of preaching, teaching, and work. It is a great gift to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us and others, not to be discouraged by hardships, disappointments, and our own way of wanting things done. Many great people have gone before us and have shown us the way. Francis showed the power of the word of hope, hope which eventually produced great fruit, due to the insight and vigor and determination of a saint who was unwilling to allow frustration and pain to prevent him from preaching the word of the Lord.

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16th Sunday In Ordinary Time (July 20, 2003)

Readings Jer 23: 1-6 Ps 23: 1-6 Eph 2: 13-18 Mk 6: 30-34

Salesian Perspective

Today's readings reveal what it means to be a good shepherd. In the first reading we experience the voice of God speaking through the prophet Jeremiah. God promises to appoint shepherds who bring back the people of Israel to the "green meadow." So much is God's love and compassion for the Israelites that God promises them a 'righteous' shepherd named the 'LORD our justice', who "shall reign and govern wisely."

As a shepherd, Jeremiah relates very personally with his flock, no matter how disordered some of his people have become. He stirs up hope in the midst of the day to day busyness of his people. Like Jeremiah, we Christians too energize the lost and confused souls in the thick of things, as we awaken in them the hope of Jesus Christ.

Paul, in the second reading, shepherds his people by offering them a vision of the New World Jesus founded. Jesus, through his passion, death and resurrection, shepherds into the future all of humanity, forming the Body of Christ. Jesus makes conscious the movement of God's love penetrating our hearts through the Spirit, who is forming us into a new and filled body. Like Paul, we also are helping humankind evolve into one body by exemplifying Jesus.

Jesus, in today's Gospel, exemplifies in two ways the love and compassion that a good shepherd ought to have. We see Jesus concerned for those who work in his name. Before his workers return to their missionary activity, Jesus sends them into 'a deserted place', where there is a different pace of life. We may not be able to go to a different place, but we ought to find a space for God alone who orders our needs.

We also experience Jesus in today's Gospel preaching to the 'vast crowd', who have no one to teach them. Jesus without equal in his love and compassion for the marginalized of society. As good shepherds, we participate in his salvific work in the world, where our love and compassion brings the Reign of God. We achieve Jesus' saving mission through the Spirit, who empowers us to be witnesses of God's love.

Our home and work place are opportunities to be servants who witness God's love and justice. We witness God and justice through our care-giving in the midst of the day to day busyness of our daily lives. Our vigilant care for those who come into our lives each day, reawakens hope in Jesus' New World that brings eternal life.

St. Francis de Sales speaks of three virtues that make for a faith-filled witness to the Church: temperance, justice, and holiness. Temperance has us develop a program that puts our personal needs in balance. Justice demands us to care for others. Holiness is the way to serve God.

Let us shepherd humanity into the future, by serving God in the joy of holiness, so that the Reign of God may enter our midst. Then, as St. Francis de Sales tells us, let us not worry whether our work will bear the fruit we desire. Do not ask you if you have gathered a harvest, but whether you have taken sufficient care to sow the seed."

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17th Sunday In Ordinary Time (July 27, 2003)

Readings 2 Kgs 4: 42-44 Ps 145: 10-11, 15-16, 17-18 Eph 4:1-6 Jn 6: 1-15

Suggested Emphasis

Let us place our lives in the hands of Jesus with utter confidence.

Salesian Perspective

St. Francis de Sales says in the Introduction to the Devout Life two classes of people ought to communicate frequently: the strong lest they should become weak, and the weak, that should become strong; the sick, that they may be restored to health, and the healthy, lest they should fall into sickness.

To have confidence in God, Francis de Sales says: Give into the hands of God's most loving providence whatever may find painful to you, and firmly believe that He will sweetly conduct you, your life and all your affairs. "When persecutions or contradictions threatening us with some great trouble, we must retire, we and our affections under the Holy Cross, with a true belief that all will end to the advantage of those who love God."

One day an ordinary woman inserted herself among people who experienced a constant cycle of poverty and cruelty. She saw the tragic situation and said: "Something must be done." She took all the money she had and rented an old building with a dirt floor. The building wasn't much but it would do. The next day the woman went around the neighborhood and offered to teach the children. She used the building as her classroom. She had no books, no desks, no chairs, and no tables. Her chalkboard was the dirt floor. She rubbed it smooth with an old rag cloth and wrote on it with a stick. This was the way the woman fought back against poverty and cruelty around her. To the casual observer it may have seemed to be a pathetic response to such immense tragedy, but she had confidence in God.

Whatever happened to the woman and her undertaking? Today there are eighty fully equipped schools, three hundred dispensaries, seventy leprosy clinics, thirty homes for the dying, thirty homes for abandoned children and forty thousand volunteers worldwide, helping her.

The woman was Mother Theresa.

There is no better story to illustrate the point of today's first reading and Gospel reading. The boy gave what he had and Jesus did the rest. Let us place our lives in the hands of Jesus with utter confidence. He will accept us, and make our lives exceed our greatest expectations. This is the significance of insignificance.

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

18th Sunday In Ordinary Time (August 3, 2003)

Readings Ex 16: 2-4, 12-15 Ps 78: 3-4, 23-25, 54 Eph 4: 17, 2-24 Jn 6: 24-35

Suggested Emphasis

"The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron..."

Salesian Perspective

Sometimes the only thing worse than the bad things that happen to us is to invest tons of energy and effort into complaining about them.

Think about it. Who of us ever really improves our situation or lot in life by complaining about it? Still, we do... to our own detriment.

Was it tough for the Israelites in the desert? You bet! As bad as things were in Egypt, did they have "three hot spots in the cot"? Yes! By contrast, did they enjoy any comforts in the wilderness? Apparently, aside from their freedom, no.

Still, God had redeemed them from slavery after all. God had given them leaders whose charge it was to lead the Israelites to a promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. However, one might wonder where the Israeli idea that somehow this trek or quest should be nothing but smooth sailing. Nonetheless, they complained... and even now seems somehow petty or small-minded.

Let's bring this closer to home. Who among us in our own day is not tempted to complain when things don't go as planned when our jobs, our marriages, our relationships turned out to be more difficult or challenging than we had expected? And, to be brutally honest, who of us can claim that grumbling or complaining about the hand we've been dealt makes playing that hand any easier? In fact, it only makes it more - and painfully - difficult.

Francis de Sales is pretty clear when it comes to grumbling or complaining: "Complain as little as possible about 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." (Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, Chapter 3)

Does this mean that we should never raise an issue, a concern or a gripe? No, but we need to be very judicious about those with whom we raise them. Francis observed: "Do not complain to irascible or fault-finding persons. If there is a just occasion for complaining to someone either to correct an offense or restore your peace of mind, do so to those who are even-tempered and really love God. Otherwise, instead of calming your mind the others will stir up worse difficulties and instead of pulling out the thorn that is hurting you they will drive it deeper into your foot." (*Ibid*)

To be sure, God hears the cries of those who complain. But, truth be told, aren't there better ways to use our words and spend our lives?

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

19th Sunday In Ordinary Time (August 10, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and will never thirst."

Salesian Perspective

When we plan a celebration and send out invitations, how often do we start with a list of "potential guests" and then to "narrow it down", scratching off certain people for one reason or another; I haven't seen them in over a year, I don't talk anymore, they didn't invite me to their party. Or as much as we might like to invite everyone, sometimes there's not enough room - someone has to go - someone has to be "cut".

The invitation to "come" to the Eucharist goes out to all of us - to all who hunger and thirst for Jesus. Perhaps at our thoughts cause us to wonder, is that invitation really meant for ME? Is Jesus inviting ME to receive him in the Eucharist? It can't be me, I'm not holy enough, I'm not good enough, I'm not worthy to receive that gift and we are taking our names off the invitation list ourselves!

Francis de Sales, as a student in Paris, received Holy Communion every week, which was considered rare in the normal practice being once a month. When asked about this, Francis replied: "For the same reason for which I consult my master and my tutor, Our Lord is my master in the sciences of the saints and I go to him often that He teach me that science. I care little about becoming learned unless I also become holy."

In the same way, Francis advises all of us, to receive the Eucharist often - all of us: "the perfect, because being very disposed they would be very wrong in not approaching the source and fount of perfection; the imperfect that the able to justly aspire to perfection; the strong lest they become feeble, the feeble that they may become strong; the sick that they may be cured, those in good health that they may not fall sick". "Those who have not many worldly affairs ought to communicate often because they have the opportunity to do so, and those who have many worldly affairs ought to communicate because they have the need of it; and those who labor much and are heavily burdened should also eat and often." (Introduction to the Devout Life, III, p.21)

I guess that includes all of us! Francis doesn't seem to put too many restrictions on who should receive the gift of the Eucharist, and neither does Jesus! He simply says "Come" if you are hungry and thirsty for me and be satisfied.

Sounds like an "open invitation" to all of us! We made the guest list; we made the "cut". The gift of the Eucharist is for us all!

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St. Francis de Sales Toledo/Detroit Province

20th Sunday In Ordinary Time (August 17, 2003)

Readings Prv 9: 1-6 Ps 34: 2-7 Eph 5: 15-20 Jn 6: 51-58

Suggested Emphasis

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him (her)."

Salesian Perspective

What a wonderful gift the Eucharist is! Jesus gives us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink. And he commands us to eat and drink that we might have life eternal life.

Like Wisdom in today's first reading, Jesus invites us to the meal he has prepared for us, a meal that enables us to share ourselves to his saving death and resurrection. On the Cross Jesus' flesh was pierced and his blood shed for others and for me. As we eat and drink, we are called to forsake foolishness that we might live and advance in the way of wisdom and understanding. (Proverbs)

The words of Wisdom remind us that this is a sacred meal, a meal of covenant. God has given Jesus for our sake. In Jesus, God's great love and mercy become visible, tangible. When we eat Jesus' body and drink his blood, we are expressing our willingness to be one with Jesus in his saving mission to the world. We announce his good news to the world.

Now we seek to understand better how we are to live as members of this covenant community. In this meal, we are one with Jesus and one with the community, one in the Body of Christ. As we leave this sacred meal, we are called to live the daily reality of our oneness.

St. Francis de Sales offers us some practical advice on how to make this happen more effectively. After Communion, consider Jesus seated in your heart and bring before him each of your faculties and senses in order to hear his call and promise him fidelity. This exercise can become our thanksgiving and our commitment to living out what we have celebrated and received. Jesus will offer us a way of using our intellect, our will, our memory, our hearing, our touch, and our speaking today in a way that gives witness to God's loving presence in the world.

St. Paul today encourages us: Watch carefully how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise. Our eating and drinking at the table of the Lord makes all of us one. May the wise way we live today make visible the oneness we experience in the Eucharist.

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

21st Sunday In Ordinary Time (August 24, 2003)

Readings Jos 24: 1-2a, 15-17, 18b Ps 34: 2-3, 16-21 Eph 5: 21-32 or 5: 2a, 25-32 Jn 6: 60-69

Suggested Emphasis

"Help us to seek the values that will bring us lasting joy in this changing world."

Salesian Perspective

These words from the beginning of the Opening Prayer of today's mass have a profoundly significant message for us. Our worlds change, and sometimes constantly. We might tend to think of the "changing world" as something without or beyond ourselves. But sometimes the most difficult world to accept with all its changes is the world within us - the one with turmoil and vicissitudes that no one ever sees - except ourselves.

We talk today of decisions and choices. Everyone wants freedom. Well, certainly God wants us to have that freedom, as it is the most dramatic and far-reaching gift he has given us. In the first reading today, Joshua addresses freedom head on: "Decide today whom you will serve." That's about as direct and contemporary a message as we could have. "What do you want? Decide!" There is no room for the wishy-washy in Joshua's approach. There is also no question where he stands: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Paul confronts the same issue in his letter on married life: "Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ." This opening statement is critical because without it the later advice to be subservient could appear demeaning and appalling. The "subordination" to which the Christian is called is always presented within and because of love - mutual love. That is why we serve others, and put ourselves last. Christ loved us first, and showed us the way to life. To

others first, especially in a relationship, or in a family - is the only way to live. It is also the only way to give life

This teaching of Christ can be "hard," and the early followers of Christ found it so, but like Peter in the Gospel, is said and done, "to whom shall we go?" Again and again, the losses and trials of life affirm that only He has "eternal life."

Francis de Sales reminds us that instability in life is inevitable, and it is our failure to recognize the truth that makes us unstable and changeable in our moods. He encourages us to remain firm and steadfast in our resolutions. The challenge of our changing world "within" is one of constancy. And that constancy is achieved by fidelity to the decisions made in daily life to love and serve the Lord, and one another - the very resolution with which we close every liturgy.

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
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22nd Sunday In Ordinary Time (July 13, 2003)

Readings Dt 4: 1-2, 6-8 Ps 15: 2-5 Jas 1: 17-18, 21b-22, 27 Mk 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Suggested Emphasis

"Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls."

Salesian Perspective

Traditions are powerful things. Whether they deal with the making of Grandmother's special casserole for our Thanksgiving dinner or with the rituals around the death of a loved one, traditions are part and parcel of all of our lives. When they are positive ones, traditions can give us a sense of identity, stability and value when our lives are filled with change.

But traditions can be negative too; especially when they become detached from the values they were meant to sustain and protect. Jesus knew that all too well as today's gospel account suggests. He challenged the Pharisees in their adherence to the laws regarding ritual purity. Jesus saw them using the traditions to unfairly judge others as being "in" or "out" of the circle of God's mercy and love, as if they, and not God, were the determiners of righteousness and religious worth.

God's Word this Sunday certainly challenges us to look at the power of tradition(s) in our lives. If they are positive ones, we should continue to make them part of our lives. But if they are negative behaviors or even attitudes--old grudges we just can't forget, old hurts we just can't forgive, old patterns of destructive choosing or thinking that we just can't escape--then, with the grace of God already "planted within us," we need to do something new to change them.

St. Francis de Sales suggests, when these old negative "traditions" make us less than the child of God we are called to be, that we concentrate on the "present moment." We are not defined by our past nor can we do anything about it. The future is yet to be. But what we do have is the here and now, the present moment, and the grace of God at that moment. It is only in the present moment that we can replace old negative behaviors and attitudes with new affirming ones. When we concentrate on accessing the power of God planted within us to make new choices "from the past moment" to "present moment," we are well on our way to starting new, positive "traditions" which will sustain and mold us, for the future, as people who "do justice and live in the presence of the Lord."

With God's grace, let us start a new tradition of living in the "present moment." That's a tradition worth keeping.

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
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23th Sunday In Ordinary Time (September 7, 2003)

Readings Is 35: 4-7a Ps 146: 7-10 Jas 2: 1-5 Mk 7: 31-37

Suggested Emphasis

"The crowd is astonished at the wonders that Jesus performs."

Salesian Perspective

It would be interesting to know what motivated the crowd who brought the "deaf" man to Jesus. All we know is "begged him to lay his hand on him."

Some would say it was a test. Word had spread throughout the countryside of a powerful prophet and now that in their district it was a golden opportunity to see if Jesus was indeed "the real thing." Others who were more sympathetic might say that these were friends of the afflicted man and they saw an opportunity as well, but one that might be a friend.

As it turns out both points of view come away satisfied. Unfortunately both also miss the point. The crowd sees the focal point of raw power, and is "astonished" at its exercise in front of them. They do not see this healing as that points to a deeper reality. Jesus does not perform miracles to demonstrate power but to illustrate the love and grace the Father has for his people.

Many people are struggling to find meaning in their lives, or trying to unravel the "secrets" of the universe or wondering why we exist. I would suggest that the only satisfactory answers come from a Christian perspective. That existence is given meaning because it is a reflective of God's existence and influence in the physical world.

However we are not simply like inert mirrors reflecting God's glory; the wonderful part is that we share in His glory. With gifts of intelligence and free will we are able to know Him, love him as a Father, appreciate what he has given us and take an active role in the unfolding of salvation history.

St. Francis de Sales urges us to be constantly aware on some level of God's presence. The first thing that we should do when we pray is to place ourselves in His presence. Everything about us, our bearing, our state of mind and what our outward message we convey should have God in it. Essentially we become one of His "signs and wonders."

And then people will say, "He has done all things well."

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14, 2003)

Readings Nm 21: 4b-9 Ps 78: 1-2, 34-38 Phil 2: 6-11 Jn 3: 13-17

Suggested Emphasis

"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

Salesian Perspective

When a team is winning, the coach reminds the players to "stay in the game," or "to play your best until the whistle sounds."

Today, it's Jesus who invites his disciples to stay the course. After giving the right response to Jesus, Peter has a painful picture Jesus paints regarding his future trip to Jerusalem. Jesus says to Peter: "Get behind me and follow me." In other words, "Peter, don't listen to the influence of Satan. Stay the course." "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

When we decide to follow Christ, we will still have troubles. We suffer the loss of friends, we see some dreams come true and some that do not. We still carry stinging hurts from our past. We often feel unappreciated and even alone.

"Stay the course." Jesus says today. He is the Christ, our steady companion through all the good times and rocky times too! Peter didn't grasp that part of the message. But Christ wants us to grasp it. In the first reading Isaiah says it: "The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be ashamed. He is near who upholds my right." Now that is Good News!

Isaiah is our coach cheering us through whatever difficulty we stumble over on our journey. God is near...until the end of the whistle sounds!

This autumn season time is a good moment to review how we are holding the course. What crosses do we carry; which ones do we need to put behind us and which are the results of life?

St. Francis de Sales knew about carrying a cross with the Lord's help. "We must carry the cross we have and not make it heavier. Its merit does not consist in the quality of the cross, but in the perfection with which it is carried." No matter how big or small our crosses are, the Good News is "to stay the course" for the full length of our years, and the Lord is always near to help us.

The Lord says, "I don't want you to have crosses but they will come anyway, and when they do I will be there, steady and gain my life, eternal life."

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
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25th Sunday In Ordinary Time (September 21, 2003)

Readings Wis 2: 12, 17-20 Ps 54: 3-4, 5, 6-8 Jas 3: 16-4:3 Mk 9: 30-37

Suggested Emphasis

"Humble yourself profoundly before God, and return him thanks."

Salesian Perspective

The first disciples certainly did ascribe to the fact that Jesus was very probably the Messiah for whom they yearned, yet he was one with a mission far from the reality that they expected. Today's Gospel gives a vivid picture of this dilemma in their failure to appreciate the fact that Jesus speaks about his upcoming death and resurrection and the suffering involved in that particular path. The clear unfolding of that prediction met with confusion and fear on the part of his disciples. This was because they found themselves unable to grasp this reality in light of their own expectations, hopes and dreams.

Their perception of their role in the reality of this kingdom led them to arguing among themselves. Their expectations naturally convinced them of the importance of their own role in the fulfillment of Jewish hopes for their future and this embroiled them in hostility, envy and enmity among themselves. Jesus again clearly demonstrated the importance of his role and how this would be played out - in ways far different from their own perceptions. The little child, in their midst, presents clearly the ideal to which his disciples are called. How unaware they seemed to be of the call that was there!

be of service rather than to be served.

Saint Francis de Sales speaks of the natural difficulty often involved in our acquiescence to the will of God. Often we find ourselves in the position of the apostles in the Gospel account today where following the will of God does not conform to our own expectations or desires. In The Treatise on the Love of God in Book 9, Chapter 2, Francis tells us that a truly living heart loves God's good pleasures not only in consolations but also in afflictions, but it loves it most of all on the cross, in pain, and labor, because love's principal power is to enable the lover to suffer for the beloved object.

We need to ask ourselves today how our own expectations, hopes or dreams prevent us from truly acquiescing to the will of God. Do the difficult times we encounter stifle us in our attempts to follow God's will? Have we been able to let our attempts to have God's will conform to our own desires and wills? Do we really appreciate the gift that Jesus has given us?

A prayerful reflection upon these questions will lead to that opportunity needed for us to acquiesce to the Will of God. What a necessary part of our journey of faith this process really is. In The Introduction to the Devout Life, Book 1, Chapter 1, St. Francis de Sales wrote, "Prayer places our intelligence in the divine love. It is the best way to purify our intelligence of its ignorance and our will of its bad affections...I suggest, above all, Philothea, mental prayer of the mind and heart, especially that which is made on the Life and Passion of Our Lord. In contemplating Him you will be united with Him; you will learn to act like Him and to conform your actions to His."

Rev. Michael S. Murray, OSFS, is Executive Director of the
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25th Sunday In Ordinary Time (September 21, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

Gentleness and trust in God

Salesian Perspective

Today as we celebrate this Liturgy we are reminded what can happen when we lose sight of God and focus instead on ourselves.

Wisdom tells us when we put ourselves first we make ourselves an obstacle to God's plan of salvation. St. James tells us what happens when jealousy and selfish ambitions get the upper hand. We followers of Jesus Christ are counseled to avoid this at all cost, whereas gentleness and trust help us to experience true satisfaction, justice and peace.

St. Jane de Chantal tells us that St. Francis de Sales always received others in a warm and friendly manner. He visited with them and spent as much time as they needed, as if he had nothing else to do. We could learn a lot from the example of St. Francis de Sales when it comes to dealing with others.

In today's Gospel, the disciples lost sight of God and wondered who among them was the greatest. Jesus took a child and putting his arm around him, said "Whoever receives one in my name receives me." We all know children have a special spirit about them. Children trust and depend on others for help in many ways. This is the example Jesus is showing his disciples and showing us today here and now how to trust God.

We are concerned about global issues: terrorism, war, poverty. We are also concerned about local issues: the responsibilities, tasks and challenges of our day-to-day activities. Truth is, the global and local may be more closely related than we might think. Someone once said "If there is a war tomorrow it is because I fought with my brother and sister today."

With the benefit of hindsight we can stop and see how God empowered and encouraged us to work through challenges.

times and circumstances in our lives. We needed to reach a point in our lives that we could not solve everything ourselves. We need to acknowledge the presence and actions of God in our lives.

Sometimes all we can do is to pray and depend on others for their gentle understanding and trust that they will help encourage us in our times of need.

We as a faith community can live Jesus in our daily lives to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ by our words and actions with all those we meet. Trust that God will continue to empower us to bring peace to ourselves and others by being the eyes, ears, feet and heart of Jesus as we go on our daily way.

Bro. Harry McGovern, OSFS, lives and works at
the Oblate community at Childs, Maryland.

26th Sunday In Ordinary Time (September 28, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"It is not good for man to be alone."

Readings Nm 11: 25-29 Ps 19: 8, 10, 12-14 Jas 5: 1-6 Mk 9: 39-43, 45, 47-48

Suggested Emphasis

"How offensive to God are rash judgments."

Salesian Perspective

"How offensive to God are rash judgments!" says St. Francis de Sales. "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 God...if an action has many different aspects, we must always think of the one which is best." (Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, Chapter 28)

These words of de Sales would have been very good advice for the disciple John in today's Gospel when he asks Jesus to stop a man expelling demons in His name "because he is not of our company." They are in fact very similar to what Jesus himself gives John: "Do not try to stop him. No man who performs a miracle using my name can at once be expelled of me. Anyone who is not against us is with us." John is not the only one who could profit from this advice. Mary could too.

These words of Jesus and St. Francis de Sales remind us that all those who do the work of Jesus belong to Him, they are "of our company" - members of our Roman Catholic Church - or not. They remind us that we should focus on denominational labels and more on the actions, spirit, and attitudes of fellow followers of Christ - without in any way diminishing our faith in the Roman Catholic dispensation as the mother of all Christian religions. Most of all, they remind us that if there is any trace of prejudice or bigotry remaining in our hearts against members of other Christian religions, we should rid ourselves of it immediately. The sad truth of history is that Christians over the centuries spent too much time building fences and too little time building highways for God. It is time now to dismantle the fences and build the highways. It is time now to tear down the walls and build bridges. It is time now to reach out with all our allies in the Christian faith, wherever we find them.

God needs you and me - and Christians everywhere - to be His prophets. Prophets in the Biblical sense typically appear in times when society has stopped listening to what God says. Biblical prophets speak "on behalf of God." They do not tell others what will happen; they tell them what should happen. They tell others what God wants and what God says. God desperately needs you and me to speak on His behalf, to tell others what God wants for us. God needs you and me to stand up and be counted on the values of the Gospel. God needs you and me to tell others that God wants peace,

life, not death; love, not hate; concern for the other, not preoccupation with self; freedom, not license; truth, not correctness; justice for all, not discrimination.

In the words of St. Francis de Sales, he needs us to "often speak of God in familiar conversation with our...friends and neighbors." (Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, Chapter.26) And "if the world holds us to be fools," because we are behaving like prophets, "let us hold the world to be mad." (*Ibid*, Part IV 4, Chapter 1)

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27th Sunday In Ordinary Time (October 5, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"It is not good for man to be alone."

Salesian Perspective

A resident of Covenant House once described her desperate situation in life this way:

"I can't go home. My stepfather doesn't want me. He won't let me in. I've been on the streets for about a year. Most days, with some friends, I rip people off. But lately I've had to come up with some money for the baby. She doesn't cry, but she won't hold her. Her father, Tony, is my best friend. Sometimes I have to hustle johns to get money for the baby."

Today's readings remind us of our need to respect one another. Today's readings speak of the reverence we should have for every human being. Today's readings speak of the care and concern that we should have for all creation.

More importantly, the readings speak of a deeper truth: like the God in whose image and likeness we are created, we are not meant to live alone.

Francis de Sales tells us that we are born to love. We are made for relationship. Much of who we are - much of our potential - could be - only becomes reality through the relationships we establish and nurture with others.

To be sure, we need to be ourselves. We need to grow in self-knowledge and self-acceptance. We need to embrace our strengths and our weaknesses. We need to consider what we can do. We need to accept what we cannot do. But this happens in a vacuum: the fullness of who God calls us to be is found precisely in our relationships with one another.

All of us are part of the wider web of life. Whether we are conscious of it or not, how we feel, how we think, what we choose, how we act, what we do and what we fail to do all have an impact on others. In our relationships with one another, we experience hurt and healing; we experience union and division; we experience solidarity and isolation.

Bottom line? At any given moment, we can either live for ourselves alone, or we can live - really live - with one another.

What's your choice?

Rev. Thomas F. Malloy, OSFS, is pastor of St. Ann Catholic Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

28th Sunday In Ordinary Time (October 12, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God."

Salesian Perspective

In the closing minutes of the movie Field of Dreams, the character of Thomas Mann is invited by the ghost of Si Joe Jackson to come "out" with the team. Ray Concella is incensed. Why is the writer invited instead of Ray? Ray launches into a litany of all the things that he has done in following the promptings of the "voice" and ends with statement: "Not once have I asked what's in it for me!" The ghost inquires: "What are you saying, Ray?" Ray responds: "I'm saying, what's in it for me?"

How honest. How revealing. How human.

We hear echoes of this same refrain in St. Peter's statement in today's Gospel: "We have put aside everything to you." Implied? "What's in it for us?"

The truth is that the Good News never seems to let up. Even as we grow in our love for God, ourselves and others the Good News always calls us to give more, to go deeper, to press on. Truth is, the Good News doesn't always feel

No wonder we sometimes ask the questions: "What more do you want? Why should I do this? What's in it for me?"

What's in it for us is a twofold promise. First, we experience the joy that comes with being more concerned about giving than receiving. We experience the freedom that comes with allowing God to penetrate all - not just some - of what we are. In short, we experience the wealth that is only known by generous people.

Second, we live each day with the belief that we shall one day enjoy God's generosity forever in a life that never ends.

So, what's in it (the Good News of Jesus) for us? How about purpose, meaning and direction in this life? How about the fullness of these - and so many other gifts - in the life to come?

What could make us richer than to live our lives with open hands and open hearts? Why, then, must we make our way into the Kingdom of God - and sharing that same Kingdom with others - so hard?

Rev. Thomas F. Malloy, OSFS, is pastor of St. Ann Catholic Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

29th Sunday In Ordinary Time (October 19, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"Through his suffering my servant shall justify many."

Salesian Perspective

Following the admonition of Christ that we should be the servants of others wouldn't sound so daunting if it were only one little word.

Suffering.

Jesus is very clear: to serve is to suffer; to suffer is to serve. This begs the question: did Jesus suffer because he had pain?

Consider the meaning of the word "suffering." The American Heritage Dictionary describes suffering as "to feel distress; to sustain loss, injury, harm or punishment." Jesus certainly experienced all these things in a big way. In this regard, we have in Christ one who is able to sympathize with us (Hebrews).

But suffering is more than simply experiencing pain; it's more than merely putting up with adversity. The same directs us to consider the roots of the English word servant, and therein we find a powerful revelation: at its root is to serve, to carry, to bear, and even more specifically, to "bear children."

Suffering is not simply about the ability to endure pain: no, suffering is the willingness to forbear, to persevere, on in doing what is right and just, what is healthy and holy even in the face of opposition or resistance. Suffering pain that comes from efforts at bringing forth new life and purpose in the lives of others. Suffering is the decision to bring something to fulfillment, to see something through to the end

This kind of suffering is not powerless passivity. This suffering - divine suffering - is about being proactive, and creative. This suffering - this service - is a matter of choice: the choice to love.

Jesus did not love to suffer. Rather, Jesus suffered precisely because he was willing to love. Jesus suffered - he persevered - in his commitment to being a source of love in the lives of others. And in seeing his vocation through to the end, he has created for each of us the possibility of a new beginning.

That's what made Jesus a servant. That's what can make us true servants. Like Jesus, while our service will be marked with suffering, it is far more important that our willingness to suffering be a hallmark of love.

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De Sales Spirituality Center in Washington, DC

30th Sunday In Ordinary Time (October 26, 2003)

Readings Jer 31: 7-9 Ps 126: 1-6 Heb 5: 1-6 Mk 10: 46-52

Suggested Emphasis

Have the strength to recognize our own blindness that Jesus might heal us.

Salesian Perspective

In our first reading we are reminded of the Lord's promise to the people of Israel that God will protect them and bring them home for He is "the Father of Israel and Ephraim is my firstborn". God is particularly solicitous of the weak women with children, and those who cannot care for themselves.

This concern exhibited by a loving Father gives us some glimpse into the unique relationship between God and his people. St. Francis de Sales continually reminds us of God's love for his creation. This "truth" certainly makes sense; it is very consistent with the fundamental reason for our existence. After all, what child is not loved by his or her parent in a totally gratuitous fashion?

In our second reading we are confronted with the role of the high priest, human as we all are. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews makes clear that the high priest is able to be compassionate because he, himself, is a wounded healer. Again, we see the gratuitous nature of our relationship to our God. God gives to us a vocation, no matter what our life. It is not ours to take, but rather to respond to his invitation.

The Gospel recounts the story of the blind beggar, Bartimeus. What a wonderful story to help us to understand that we are loved by our God unconditionally. However, this relationship, while gratuitous, is not passive. Bartimeus had to go to Jesus to have pity on him. Jesus, in response, returns the sight of the blind man. The blind man asks that he might be able to see and Jesus tells him that his faith has saved him.

We ask for the faith that we need to see the fundamental relationship between God and his people. Our blindness prevents us from seeing the unique goodness in each person. This inability to see the good keeps us in our sinfulness and

the possibility of maximizing our gifts and talents for our own good and the good of our brothers and sisters.

Francis de Sales challenges us to have the faith of the blind man and so to be confident enough in our own intrinsic worth that we dare to ask our Lord that we might see. If we are strong enough to take this step, oh the places we

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All Souls (November 2, 2003)

Readings Wis 3: 1-9 Ps 23: 1-6 Rom 5: 5-11 Jn 11: 17-27

Suggested Emphasis

"Christ, once raised from the dead, will never die again; death has no more power over him." (Romans 6: 3 - 9)

Salesian Perspective

On the subject of praying for the dead, St. Francis de Sales wrote: "We believe that we may pray for the faithful and that the prayers and good works of the living greatly relieve them and are profitable to them, for this reason those who die in the grace of God, and consequently counted among the saints, do not go to paradise at the very moment, but many go to Purgatory, where they suffer a temporal punishment, from which our prayers and good can help and serve to deliver them." (The Catholic Controversy, 3, pages 353- 354)

We pray for our departed brothers and sisters. We pray that they may be at rest. We pray that they may experience the fullness of peace. We pray that they may no longer want for anything. We pray that they may take their place at the eternal banquet of love, a place prepared for them by God before the beginning of time.

On this feast of All Souls, we pray for all the dead whom we have loved and lost.

But prayer is a conversation. Prayer is an experience of mutuality. Prayer is never a one-way street. Therefore, we do not only pray for the dead: we also pray to them, for they are not merely "the dead" but are now counted among the

We pray to them for their assistance and support. We pray to them for guidance and strength. We pray to them for patience and forbearance. We pray to them for reconciliation and healing. Someday, we may pray to them for the ability to simply put one foot in front of the other.

Here is a simple example of this subject. Francis de Sales had occasion to write a letter of encouragement to a nun. In it he recommended: "I should like you to consider how many saints, both men and women, have lived in the married state like you, and that they all accepted this vocation readily and gladly: Sara, Rebecca, Anne, Monica, and a host of others. Let that encourage you and ask them to pray for you." (Stopp, Selected Letters, page 61)

We pray to them for their assistance and support. We pray to them for guidance and strength. We pray to them for patience and forbearance. We pray to them for reconciliation and healing. Some days, we pray to them for the ability to simply put one foot in front of the other.

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Dedication of the Lateran Basilica (November 9, 2003)

Readings Ez 47: 1-2, 8-9, 12 Ps 46: 2-3, 5-6, 8-9 1 Cor 3: 9-11, 16-17 Jn 2: 13-22

Suggested Emphasis

"You are God's building. Thanks to the favor God showed me I laid a foundation as a wise master-builder might. Now someone else is building upon it. Everyone, however, must be careful how he builds...for the temple of God and you are that temple."

Salesian Perspective

Today the Church marks the anniversary of the dedication of the Cathedral church of Rome by Pope Sylvester I. November 9, 324 AD. As long ago as this was, the truth is that human beings have been building one thing or another since the beginning of time: the Tower of Babel; the Ark; the pyramids; the coliseum; the Great Wall of China; the Eiffel Tower; the Statue of Liberty; the World Trade Center...

As co-creators with God, we are charged with making something good out of all that God has entrusted to us. We are charged with building a world marked by liberty, justice, freedom, peace, reconciliation, truth, honesty, kindness. In short, we are called to build up the Kingdom of God here on earth, laying the ground work for that great and mysterious day when the ongoing creative, redeeming and inspiring work of God will reach its fulfillment: life of glory with Jesus Christ.

Closer to home, there's lots of work to be done. Building upon the foundation of Christ, Paul, Sylvester and countless others, we must build things that give glory to God and which serve the needs of one another. However, the most important things that we build aren't things at all: they are our relationships with each other: husband, wife, mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister, friend, neighbor, and co-worker.

Look at Jesus himself. He never helped to break ground for a new school. He never laid a cornerstone for a new synagogue. He never constructed a monument. He never attended the ribbon-cutting for a new store. What he built is much more important and powerful: a web of relationships in which men, women and children personally experience God's love for them; a web of life and love meant to be shared and expanded with future generations.

Here we stand, countless centuries since the dawn of creation. So much has been built, but so much more, with God's help, remains to be constructed and strengthened...especially honest, just, peaceable, freeing, life-giving relationships with one another.

Are we up to the task today?

Are we careful about what and how we build?

What kind of foundation are we laying for tomorrow?

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33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time (November 16, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"As to the exact day or hour, no one knows it...except the Father."

Salesian Perspective

We are captivated -- if not outright frightened -- by the apocalyptic language of Jesus in today's gospel. In fact Jesus used language and images that for centuries had been a part of the Jewish tradition for describing the end time.

However, Jesus' emphasis is not about the end but that we might be watchful so that we are better prepared. What does it mean to be watchful?

We are called to be watchful for his presence in each and every present moment.

Jesus does not want us to be obsessed with his coming in glory but to prepare for the end time by recognizing his presence with us right here, right now: each time two or three gather in his name, each time the word of God takes root in us, each time the body of Christ rests in our hands or on our tongues, each time we look into the eyes of a man or child who hunger for food or justice or knowledge or love.

Christ comes to us every day. Christ is with us at each and every present moment.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory he will say to those at his right hand: "Come, You have my Father's blessing. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you came to visit me, in prison and you came to visit me. I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers and sisters, it is done for me." (Matthew 25:34-36, 40)

What is important is what we do with each present moment. The gift of time has been given to us for our transformation. Writing to St. Jane de Chantal on December 29, 1609, St. Francis de Sales reflects on time as the context in which we are transformed into the glory of the children of God. "This past year is about to be swallowed up in the gulf which has devoured all the rest. O state of uncertainty and change! May time pass on, time with which we ourselves gradually so as to be transformed into the glory of God's children. Alas, when I think how I have used God's time, I fear that I may not want to give me his eternity, since he only wants to bestow it in those who make good use of time. (Selected Letters. Trans. Elizabeth Stopp, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960, p. 172)

In a letter to a visitation novice he writes "Keep your eye steadfastly fixed on the blissful day of eternity toward which the course of years bears us on... meanwhile in these passing moments there lies enclosed in a tiny kernel the seed of eternity, and in our humble little works of devotion there lies the prize of everlasting glory, and the little pains we take to serve God lead to the repose of a bliss that can never end. (p. 236).

He recognizes that all our actions and all the pain and suffering we meet in the course of the day can have eternal significance. As watchful people, we live in each present moment offering to God all that we are about in the course of the day, recognizing his presence in all we meet, and asking God's help to accept the little pains we take to serve him.

And we do none of this alone, for the God who calls us to be watchful is ever present. Francis de Sales reminds us that God watches over us and that we need to hold on to the hand of providence and God will help us in all that happens where we can not walk, God will carry us. (p. 262)

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Christ the King (November 23, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"His Dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away; his kingship shall not be destroyed."

Salesian Perspective

James J. Hill was a captain of industry, one of the great railroad barons of the late 19th century. The "Hill" lines he controlled included the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific. Hill's life dream was to use his power to forge these (and other) companies into a vast empire stretching west from Chicago.

the great American heartland all the way to the Pacific Northwest.

Today we celebrate Christ's kingship, Christ's power, Christ's royal character. Unlike earthly kings (and their successors, the captains of industry), however, Christ's dominion, as we hear in the Book of the Prophet Daniel and is - an everlasting dominion. Unlike other earthly empires, Christ's dream - the establishment of the Kingdom - will never pass away

What kind of king is Christ? How is his dominion unique among other monarchs? We look to the words of St. Francis Sales in a conference on "hope" he gave to the Sisters of the Visitation in 1620. The occasion was the founding of another Visitation community (over 80 of which were established by the time St. Jane de Chantal died in 1641):

"You have always only one and the same king, our crucified Lord, under whose authority you will live secure and wherever you may be. Do not fear lacking anything, for as long as you do not choose any other king, he will always be with you. Take care to increase in love and fidelity towards Christ's divine goodness, keeping as close to this king as possible, and then all will be well with you. Learn from him all that you have to do. Do nothing without his advice. Christ the king is the faithful friend who will guide you and govern you and take care of you as, with all my heart, I ask him

No benign dictator here. No benevolent tyrant. No philanthropic captain of industry. No, here we see a person of royal nature and character who lays down his life for others. His dominion serves the needs of others. His prestige gives others guidance and hope. His kingdom provides sound advice. His commonwealth is all about faithful, loving friendship. His vision gives clear direction. His empire is the dream where all might live as one.

Like Christ, we are called to use our God-given power and promise to serve the needs of others. Like Christ, our "divine right" impels us to love one another.

Whose dream, whose empire, whose kingdom are we building today?

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First Sunday of Advent (November 30, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"Be vigilant at all times."

Salesian Perspective

The readings today convey a sense of longing and expectation. The readings today speak of the anticipation of a promise fulfilled, a day when the justice of God will be available to all, and not just a chosen few. The readings also speak of the need to not be caught off guard when the fulfillment comes.

We Christians believe that this fulfillment of hope is embodied in the person, the power and the promise of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the justice of God. Jesus is "the Lord, our justice." Jesus seized every opportunity to mediate to others the love, the reconciliation, the truth - in short, the justice - of the living God.

As followers of Jesus, the vigilance we practice is not limited to waiting for the fulfillment of a far-off, final promise. Our vigilance is about seizing the countless opportunities we have each day to mediate something of the justice of God who is Jesus Christ, in our relationships with others.

Advent challenges us to identify anything in our lives that distracts us, that causes us to "become drowsy" or we do not do what is right and good in the eyes of God. Advent challenges us to rid ourselves of those cares and anxieties

reduce our ability to seize the challenge that Jesus offers to us to be models of his justice in the eyes of our brothers and sisters. Advent calls us to recognize that we are no longer waiting for the Kingdom of God to take its rightful place in our hearts: rather, the Kingdom of God waits for each of us to do our part in fulfilling its promise in the lives of others.

Be vigilant at all times. What is the point of having great intentions "to conduct ourselves to please God" if we miss countless opportunities each day, each moment to meet the needs of one another?

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Preparing the Way

Taken from Pulpit and Pew: A Study in Salesian Preaching by Vincent Kerns, MSFS

Preached at Annecy on the fourth Sunday in Advent, 20 December 1620. (Annecy Edition, Vol. IX. pp. 442-446)

Prepare the way of the Lord, straighten out his paths. Every valley is to be bridged, and every mountain and hill and the windings are to be cut straight, and the rough paths made into smooth roads. (1)

These words of St John the Baptist awake an echo in a pilgrim's heart, fatigued by the gradients of the way, weary of the twists and turns in the road. How well this fits our lives! Life is full of hills and valleys, full of tortuous paths. Penitence can smooth them all out. Penitence will bridge the valleys, level the hills, cut straight and smooth the road. This is why St John advised: Come then, yield the acceptable fruit of repentance. (2) He means us to level our mountain of pride; he wants us to bridge our valleys of apathy and cowardice.

The valleys which St. John is anxious for us to bridge are our fears. Fear, when it is excessive, tends to discourage us with the memory of past sins. We are to bridge these valleys with hope and trust; the time draws near for our deliverance. (3) Fear and hope should always go together. Fear without hope is despair; hope without fear is presumption. So we are to bridge the valleys which fear has carved out in our lives: the uneasiness that results from our realization of the imperfections and sins we have committed. We are to bridge them by a combination of trust and the loving fear of God.

Every mountain and hill, says St. John, is to be leveled. These mountains are presumption and pride, the great obstacles to our Lord's coming. God has a way of humbling the proud, (4) of searching deep into their hearts to uncover that which is hidden there. Are you full of pride and presumption like the Pharisee in the gospel? (5) Or do you take after the publican? The Pharisee was a mountain of pride; he boasted a few seeming virtues for which he took all the credit. "Thank thee, God, that I am not like the rest of men; for myself, I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess." But God, seeing his pride, rejected him. The poor publican - in the eyes of men a rugged mount of sinfulness - hid himself in the sight of God. He would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, so serious were his past sins; he could not even attempt to cross the temple threshold, chastened as he was in spirit, humble of heart. Thus he found himself highly favored.

The windings are to be cut straight, St. John goes on. Winding paths can lead the traveler astray, so they need to be straightened for the Lord's coming. We need to cut straight our twisted motives, reducing them to a single aim: to please God by doing penance. It is no use putting it off until later. You will find people saying that God is good and merciful and that it will be easy to come to terms with him; a good act of contrition at the hour of death, and all will be forgotten. What is that but pride and presumption, wallowing in sin at the expense of God's goodness! Don't they realize that although God is infinitely merciful, he is also infinitely just; that when his mercy is exasperated, his justice is chafed? (6)

Finally, the rough paths are to be made into smooth roads. This means setting our moods in order by mortifying our passions, our likes and dislikes. Evenness of temperament is the most attractive virtue of the spiritual life, but it requires continual effort. How wonderfully attractive our Lord's life was! His perfect calmness in every eventuality is strikingly apparent. No one else ever showed such perfect serenity except our blessed Lady, who alone - besides her Son -

sinless. All the other saints worked hard to acquire this perfection. But, although they did their best, not a single completely succeeded in achieving perfect evenness of temperament. There was always a trace of moodiness in even in St John the Baptist, for it is the opinion of some Doctors of the Church (7) that he committed venial sin.

How delightful it would be to find a person of completely even temperament! We are so far from being like that so changeable, so unsettled. One minute we can be on good terms with someone and in the next minute we seen walking on their toes: we are serene today, and will bite someone's head off tomorrow. We are so fickle.

So, these are the "ways" that we have to prepare for our Lord's coming. If we are to be successful, we need to take John the Baptist for our teacher. Like his own disciples in the gospel, we shall find that he leads us to the Savior herald he was. Our Lord, in his turn, will present us to the eternal Father, whose praises - together with the Son and Holy Spirit - we shall sing for ever and ever. Amen.

1. Luke 3: 4-6.
2. Luke 3: 8
3. Cf. Luke 21: 28; Romans 13: 11.
4. Cf. Matthew 23:12; Luke 1:52; 18:14.
5. Cf. Luke 18: 10-14.
6. Cf. Romans 2: 4,5
7. Eg., St Peter Canisius.

2nd Sunday of Advent (December 7, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"Prepare the way of the Lord with the splendor of glory from God forever."

Salesian Perspective

John the Baptizer traveled throughout the countryside proclaiming a baptism of repentance using the words of Isaiah: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."

Just as John the Baptizer reminded the people in the region of the Jordan to prepare the way of the Lord, we, too, are called to do the same in our own day and age. This personal challenge began with our own Baptism when we became members of the Body of Christ. It happens every day through our daily words and actions, our attempts to "**Live Jesus**" in our interactions with one another.

Today's reading from Baruch reminds us to "put on the splendor of glory from God forever", while our Responsorial Psalm reminds us the "Lord has done great things for us: we are (or at least, should be) filled with joy".

Are we truly filled with joy as we prepare the way of the Lord? This can only happen if we work to deepen our relationships with God and one another. We can not give what we do not have. If God (and the things of God) is the center of our life, how can we be filled with the joy that only God can give?

St. Francis de Sales tells us in The Introduction to the Devout Life that devotion must be experienced in different ways by the gentleman, the worker, the servant, the widow, the young girl and the married woman. In addition, devotion (which is, doing what is right in the eyes of God *readily, diligently and frequently*) must be adapted to the strength, activities and responsibilities of each individual person. But what we all have in common, wrote St. Francis de Sales, is that preparing the way of the Lord - and being fully prepared to recognize the countless ways that Jesus works in our lives even though ultimately begins inside each of us: in our hearts, minds, affections and attitudes. Our actions, in turn, should be expressions of the ongoing conversion and transformation taking place even as we prepare a wider, greater and more open place for Jesus within us.

If we strive to keep our hearts, minds and imaginations focused upon the splendor and glory that God promises (and that we can experience even now), we will be able to prepare the way of the Lord - or, at the very least, make sure we don't get in God's way - as we travel (with joy) the road to holiness with others.

How can we prepare the way for the Lord today?

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3rd Sunday of Advent (December 14, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"What should we do?"

Salesian Perspective

The crowds asked John the Baptizer: "What should we do?"

Such a simple question. Such a challenging question. Such a potentially life-changing question.

You and I live in a world in which the coming of Christ has already occurred. However, this world in which we live is also a place in which the possibilities of that coming have yet to be completely - and forever - fulfilled.

What should we do? Try to fulfill it by sheer force of human will? Should we just shrug our shoulders and hope for the best?

The answer for us is the answer that John offered to the crowd two thousand years ago: "Be generous; do your jobs; don't exact from others more than they should - or can - give." In short, following the Will of God, following the example of Jesus, cooperating with the promptings of the Spirit is not about doing more, doing extra. It's not about embracing a different vocation. It's not about being someone other than who you already are. It is about doing more with the gifts you are already living, and doing more with who you are in ways that give life, justice and peace to others.

Francis de Sales firmly believed this. He cautioned against jumping to the conclusion that following Jesus, walking with Jesus and being Jesus for others requires that we do extra. Francis said clearly and succinctly: "Be who you are. Be well."

We want a world that more perfectly reflects the peace, the hope, the reconciliation, the justice and righteousness of the Kingdom of God. We want a world that more clearly embodies the fulfillment of the promise given to us in Jesus. We want a world in which we can get a taste here and now of the banquet that awaits us forever in heaven.

No small enterprise.

What should we do? Be generous. Do our jobs; live our lives justly. Do not take or expect from others more than they should - or perhaps cannot - give.

Be who you are. Be that well. Be who, what, why and how God creates, redeems and inspires you to be: joy to yourself; joy to others.

And change the world - even a small part of it - in the process.

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4th Sunday of Advent (December 21, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"Mary set out and traveled in haste..."

Salesian Perspective

The angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary contained two discrete, yet related, messages: (1) Mary would be the mother of the long-expected Messiah, and (2) her cousin Elizabeth had conceived a child.

No sooner has Mary said "yes" to the invitation to be the mother of the Messiah than she runs off "in haste" to visit her cousin.

In a very real sense, long before she actually delivered the Child who would redeem the world from the hopelessness and despair of sin, Mary was already giving birth to the Messiah through her own willingness and eagerness to serve the needs of another: in this case, a relative who, because of her age, might have been considered a woman with a high-risk pregnancy.

On the face of it, there is nothing noteworthy about Mary's action. After all, wouldn't any decent human being do the same for a relative in need? What makes Mary's service remarkable is the urgency with which she did it. She truly is a model of virtue, one who clearly demonstrates in her own life that the best way of saying "thank you" for God's grace to her is to be a source of that goodness to others.

St. Francis de Sales observed: "Mary does not consider that she is wasting time when she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. No, it is an act of loving courtesy." (Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 159.) In her "haste" to meet the needs of Elizabeth, Mary shows us the path of true devotion. Francis de Sales continued: "God rewards us according to the office we exercise. I do not say that we may not aspire to the outstanding virtues, but I do say that we must begin ourselves in the little virtues first without which the great ones are often false and deceptive."

Advent reminds us that the great hope for which we all long is built upon the foundation of little, simple, ordinary kindness, graciousness, patience, honesty, hospitality, and compassion. Mary shows us in her own life how God challenges us to reach out to others in need, even when this requires us to go out of our way in the process.

Like Mary, may we come to see that our willingness to do little things for one another with great love and enthusiasm - provides a solid foundation for our ultimate vocation: to conceive - and give birth to - our own lives in the Great Promise of God's love.

Jesus Christ.

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Christmas (December 25, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

"All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God."

Salesian Perspective

"God has signified to us in so many ways and by so many means that God wills that all of us should be saved that we can claim to be ignorant of this fact. For this very purpose God made us "in his own image and likeness" by Cre

by the Incarnation God has made himself in our image and likeness, after which he suffered death in order to raise us up and save us." (Treatise on the Love of God, Book VIII, Chapter 4)

From the beginning of time God has desired that all of us come to know the truth and be saved. What is this truth? We are made in God's image and likeness; we share in the very essence of God's divine life; we are awash in God's constant and redeeming and inspiring love; we are meant to grow this life and love here on earth; we are destined to experience love and life forever in heaven.

Provided that we choose to do so.

Beyond the comforting images of the stable, the "star of wonder," the magi, the shepherds and the angelic choir, the hard and unavoidable truth: while God desires that we be saved, the decision is still ours to make. Francis de Sales observed: "All men are not saved, although the will that all should be saved still remains God's true will, for God respects us according to the condition of both divine and human nature. God's goodness moves him to communicate liberally the help of his grace so that we may come to the joy of God's glory, but our nature requires that God's liberality leave us at liberty to use it for our salvation or to neglect it to our damnation." (Ibid)

This is not an attempt to rain on the parade of the Christmas promise of joy, peace, reconciliation and joy. This is to throw a wet blanket over the time of year which Francis de Sales described as "dedicated to the sovereign mercy to us by the Son of God when he was born on earth for our salvation." (Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 294) Simply put, Christmas is a time to ask ourselves the question: do I take the gift of Jesus Christ in my life as seriously as God? Put another way, am I as interested in the eternal disposition of my soul as God is?

All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God in the birth of the Messiah. Would that all the ends of the earth - starting with people like you and me - would choose to accept this gift, and make better use of this gift.

To say nothing of sharing it.

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Feast of the Holy Family (December 28, 2003)

Suggested Emphasis

Being holy, 'living in God's house,' does not preserve us from difficulties.

Salesian Perspective

What parent could not relate to the scene in today's Gospel? Noticing that Jesus was missing a day after leaving Jerusalem, we can imagine this brief - yet troubling - interchange: "He isn't with *me*. I thought he was with *you*. Why he *isn't*?"

This was not the first instance of trouble for the Holy Family. In fact, challenges faced them from the very beginning of their experience as family. St. Francis de Sales says: "Consider the vicissitudes and changes, the alternations of joy and sorrow" we find in the Holy Family. "What joy, what jubilation for Our Lady to receive the tidings that she will receive the Eternal Word! By contrast, consider St. Joseph, seeing that she was with child and knowing that it was not by his will, what affliction and distress he no doubt plunged!"

"When our Lady brought forth her Son, the angels announced his birth, the shepherds, and magi came to adore him, the rejoicing and consolation was theirs, amid all this. But wait: a little later, the angel of the Lord said to Joseph in a dream: take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt! Oh how great a subject this must have been to Our Lady and St. Joseph." (Conference III, *Sermon on the Octave of Holy Innocents*)

While the ups and downs, the joys and pains of Jesus, Mary and Joseph have something to teach us, the real lesson for those who try to maintain and nurture 'holy families' in our own lives is how the Holy Family faced life's tribulations: "We must consider the great peace and serenity of mind and heart of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, shown in their constancy amid all the unexpected events that befell them."

The measure of a 'holy family' is not about what happens - or doesn't - to its members. Rather, a holy family is one that demonstrates a certain grace and confidence when *faced* with the ups and down of daily living, especially the unexpected ones. Francis de Sales urges us: "Consider whether we are justified in being surprised and troubled when we meet similar accidents in the house of God. We must repeat over and over again to ourselves, so as to more deeply imprint the truth upon our minds, that no turn of events must ever carry away our hearts and minds in displays of temper, for the unevenness of temper proceeds from no other source than our own passions and preferences."

We most clearly imitate the Holy Family in our own lives when we impress upon our minds and hearts that the world does not revolve around us, that things do not always go our way, that our plans are frequently not that which ultimately comes to pass. While we cannot always control what happens to us, we can choose how to respond to the unexpected events of our lives in ways that promote faith, tranquility, strength and courage.

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