

THE GREAT TRADITIONS OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY – PART VI

THE CALL TO HOLINESS AND THE BUSINESS OF LIFE

I. Salesian spirituality emphasizes growth in the spiritual life through integrated one=s whole day, and all of one's duties and activities with one=s prayer. This tradition was first developed by St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), especially in the context of his help with St. Jane de Chantal (1573-1641) in forming the Sisters of the Visitation. The Salesian Society and the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales are also orders founded upon this tradition.

A.. St. Francis de Sales was a missionary and Bishop of Geneva, who was very instrumental in both reconverting part of Europe and in giving practical advice to the laity in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.

1. At the time, the great religious debates between the Catholic Church and the Protestant denominations had been raging for decades, along with the Wars of Religion. At the same time, with the discovery of the New World, and rapid increases in technology and trade, there was a dramatic rise in commerce, government, new professions and a vibrant culture. Salesian spirituality would emphasize living out holiness in the midst of these more modern conditions and the calm, but courageous presentation of the faith to the world.

2. St. Francis de Sales was the eldest of 13 children of a pious and noble family in Savoy, France. He was a brilliant student at the University of Paris and went to study law at University of Padua. His father thus had great dreams of him being a successful lawyer and even statesman of great renown. But, under the influence of his Jesuit spiritual director and Franciscan advisors, he was gradually drawn more to theology and living a consecrated life. He gradually overcame the opposition of his family and was ordained a priest at the age of 26.

3. At about that time, Duke Charles Emmanuel of Savoy recaptured Chablais, one of its states that had been controlled by Protestants who forbade Catholicism; to restart the Church there, he asked for some priests, one of whom was Francis de Sales.

a. To persuade people to return to the faith, Francis started printing leaflets that described the faith, which were later gathered together in a book called The Contraversies. At first, he was met with great opposition, ridicule and even threats to his life.

b. However, his writing, the holiness of his life and his ability to explain the faith in preaching and debates won more and more converts. Over 72,000 people returned to the Church in twelve years, such that almost the entire region returned to the faith.

4. In 1599, after many consultations with the Duke, St. Francis de Sales became the coadjutor Bishop of Geneva, and he succeeded to the full office of Bishop in 1602. It was a difficult position because he could not visit the city of Geneva itself, except secretly on one occasion, for the Calvinists had forbidden Catholic worship. Nevertheless, he worked very personally on training of seminarians, catechetics, visitations of all of the parishes, and formations of religious societies. He was considered a model for the implementation of the reforms of the Council of Trent.

5. St. Francis' most famous work is the Introduction to the Devout Life, which was first published in 1608 and finished a year later; this classic was based largely upon his spiritual direction of St. Jane de Chantal and others. He wrote the more complex Treatise on the Love of God in 1616. Earlier, when engaged in the reconversion of Chablais, he also wrote numerous treatises including The Defense of the Standard of the Holy Cross, which defended and described how the cross could be used in preaching.

6. His insights into the universal call to holiness and the discerning engagement of the world anticipated many of the teachings of the Vatican II Council, such that Pope Paul VI said in his 1967 apostolic letter Subaudiae Gemma on St. Francis de Sales that "no one of the recent Doctors of the Church more than St. Francis de Sales anticipated the deliberations and decision of the Second Vatican Council with such keen and progressive insight."

7. Pope Pius IX declared him a Doctor of the Church in 1877, and he is often called the Doctor of Divine Love. In 1923, Pope Pius XI published an encyclical about him entitled Rerum Omnium Perturbationem (Disorders of the Modern World) and declared him to be the patron of the Catholic press.

B. One of his spiritual directees was St. Jane de Chantal, a widow whose husband had been killed in a hunting accident. She grew steadily in prayer and, with St. Francis, started the Visitation sisters in 1610.

1. Based upon the model of Mary=s visit to Elizabeth, the order focused on humility, piety and charity. Although at first, there was an attempt to avoid living in a cloister except during novitiate, that aspect of religious life was soon included. However, this order was still a pioneer in "semi-cloistered" life, i.e. a life that combines cloistered life with a vocation in the world, here particularly in teaching and care for the sick and poor, who are to be shown at all times the love of God.

2. Instead of austere external penances, the interior mortification of continually living in common with other sisters and the world in an active way is the emphasis. The order certainly does have mortifications, such as extra fasting and rising at 5 a.m. (at least according to the traditional rule.) However, the most important emphasis is on charitably dealing with each person at all time.

3. The rule does call for an hour of mental prayer in the morning and a half hour at night. But there is even more a continual emphasis on prayer throughout the day to consecrate all times and places.

4. There is more time for recreation than in other convents. However, as the Catholic Encyclopedia points out, "the sisters should talk with cordiality and simplicity only of agreeable and piously cheerful topics."

5. There are now different ways of living out this life: fully cloistered (with little or no active dealings with the world), "active," i.e. those who work in the world, and semi-cloistered.

C. During his lifetime, St. Francis de Sales also tried to establish an oratory that would be the basis for an order of men. That effort died out in the early eighteenth century. However, in 1875, the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales were established both for lay brothers and clerics to live out his spirituality, especially in the context of education, missionary work and special chaplaincies (e.g., prisons.) Two of this diocese's parishes are run by the Oblates, as were Paul VI and Ireton high schools until recently.

D. The Salesian Society was founded by St. John Bosco in the mid-19th century.

1. Don (Father) John Bosco opened several schools for boys, starting in Turin, Italy in 1845. He soon drafted a rule for

the new order of priests and brothers that was developing around this work, many of whom had been the very students he had helped educate. In 1873, Pope Pius IX gave final approval to this Rule of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, and the order spread rapidly throughout the world, now having 2711 houses.

2. The Salesian Society's central focus is the care and education of the young, but its mission extends to many charitable works that involve large groups of people. Starting with St. John Bosco, its educational focus tries to avoid relying heavily on punitive measures, but instead in promoting a sense of the love of God and growth in virtue and confidence.

3. Also starting with St. John Bosco, who quite literally had visions of the souls of the youth he was educating, there is a sense of vision, in this case of the real calling to holiness of each person, and a supreme confidence that all sins can be overcome and each person can become a saint.

II. Salesian spirituality emphasizes that all people are called to the devout life, but in different ways.

A. Anticipating the Vatican II Council's teaching, St. Francis very strongly emphasized that there is a universal call to holiness. This universal call brings out the unique goodness of each person, which is discovered over a lifetime by responding to God's will.

1. In part I, chapter 3 of the Introduction, St. Francis de Sales famously said, "It is an error, or rather a heresy, to wish to banish the devout life from the regiment of soldiers, the mechanic's shop, the court of princes, or the home of married people. . . . Wherever we may be, we can and should aspire to a perfect life."

2. But he also emphasized that the life of devotion must be adapted to each person's situation, such that it is consistent with their vocation, and brings out their unique goodness.

a. As Victor Hoagland and George Angelini wrote in The Book of Saints: The Lives of the Saints According to the Liturgical Calendar (1986), "Francis de Sales was convinced that God sees humanity as a great and varied garden,

each person beautiful in his or her uniqueness. The various callings of life – soldier, prince, widow, married woman – are like the various flowers of the field; God loves them all. Through his or her own calling, each person can find a way to a deeper friendship with his or her creator. Francis approached people with genuine respect and gently guided them to recognize the unique path they would take in life. He made the journey to God joyful and possible for everyone to make. Above all, he advised against despair and the burden of fear."

b. In Rerum Omnium Perturbationem, Pope Pius XI likewise wrote, "His task was to give the lie to a prejudice which in his lifetime was deeply rooted and has not been destroyed even today, that the ideal of genuine sanctity held up for our imitation by the Church is impossible of attainment or, at best, is so difficult that it surpasses the capabilities of the great majority of the faithful and is, therefore, to be thought of as the exclusive possession of a few great souls. St. Francis likewise disproved the false idea that holiness was so hedged around by annoyances and hardships that it is inadaptable to a life lived outside cloister walls."

3. Thus, while we should certainly know the wisdom of the saints, as a business man knows the practices of other businesses, each person (and each spiritual director) must know how to adopt them to the particular circumstances he is in. There is a common moral law, a common faith, and common sacraments, but each person applies them in a different way. When Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI was asked by a reporter, "How many ways are there to heaven?" he responded, "As many as there are people. For even within one faith, each man's way is an entirely personal one." Salt of the Earth (1996) 32.

B. St. Francis argued that devotion makes one's rightful calling better. In a classic analogy in the beginning of the Introduction, he said that, as a bee draws pollen from a plant, not only without damaging it but making it better, so true devotion includes all aspects of life; it not only does not damage legitimate callings but makes them more delightful and more dedicated.

1. God may draw one away from one calling to a better one, but never from a productive calling to mere vagueness or abstract thought.

2. St. Francis cautioned against any apparent devotion that leads one to neglect duties. In The Golden Counsels, a collection of his advice to people in the world, he says, "We are sometimes so occupied with being good angels that we neglect to be good men and women." @

C. As with the other great spiritual leaders, he does insist on both intense and continual conversion from sin.

1. Thus, in the Introduction he reiterates that purification from sin (especially mortal sin) is both a necessary preparation and effect of a truly devout life. Like St. Ignatius, he advises a general confession at the beginning of a true advance in the spiritual life. And he pointed out that, to progress, one must reject not only mortal sins, but even an attachment to them. See Introduction to the Devout Life, Part I, chapters 6-7.

2. But, while progress in the spiritual life does begin with a profound rejection of even attachment to mortal sins, this progress against sin is also a continual effort. In The Golden Counsels, he wrote, AWe must be prepared to see weeds growing in our garden and also have the courage to pull them out@ and AThere is no better means of progressing the spiritual life than to be continually beginning afresh, and never to think we have done enough.@

3. As one progresses, it becomes more and more important to avoid even attachment to lesser sins, such as impatience, vanity, jealousy and the like. He advises in chapter 9 of part IV of the Introduction to fight these temptations by trying to practice the opposite virtue, e.g., by praising the person that one is jealous of or by taking on humbler tasks when one feels like boasting.

4. Like all other spiritual masters, St. Francis recommended taking on penances and austerities, but with prudence, in order to overcome sin and advance. One should practice self-discipline, but also humility also involves recognizing our limits. We should pray for crosses in proportion to the measure we have borne those already given.

D. St. Francis also said that the progress of prayer can be measured by willingness to love God and neighbor.

1. Deep spiritual insights and delights are the rewards of devotion, and should be gladly accepted as such, both because they are gifts and because they make it easier to carry out God's will. However, the essence is a growth in the desire to carry out God's commandments in love of Him and neighbor. As he wrote to a lay woman who was beginning a more intense life of devotion, "We must not only do the will of God, but in order to be devout we must do it joyfully." Thy Will Be Done (published 1995) 11.

2. Thus, devotion makes the obedience of God's commandments delightful and sweet. As he wrote near the beginning of the Introduction, "Just as it is the function of charity to enable us to observe all of God's commandments in general and without exception, so it is the part of devotion to enable us to observe them quickly and diligently." This unity of life in sensing the desire to do good at all times is the real sign of progress. Thus, one of St. Francis' favorite mottos, given right near the beginning of the Introduction, is "Live the Jesus whom I love." Live here is an intransitive verb, and so he expands on it, "Yes, Lord Jesus, live and reign in our hearts forever and ever."

3. St. Francis de Sales also points out that the most important virtues, such as humility, temperance and integrity, are often not honored by the world, which instead prefers such virtues as great magnanimity and great acts of courage, which (while still important) are needed less often. He says that in a similar fashion, the world puts more value on gold than wheat, although the latter is much more important. He said in one sermon, "People are making a mistake when they attach small little value to small acts of surrender to the bad humor of another, to the gentle endurance of other people's faults, . . . to a kind answer to an unjust or harsh rebuke, to the patient acceptance of refusal, to the showing of kindness to others. All these things are small in the eyes of the world, which appreciates only dramatic virtue, but they are great in God's eyes."

4. Comparing virtues to the different plants in a garden, and especially in the garden of Eden, St. Francis says that virtues can exist before bearing fruit in good works, but will, if they are real, always bear fruit and thus come to completion in the end. See Treatise on the Love of God, Part 8, chapter 8

5. Both for the repudiation of sin and progress in the moral life, St. Francis recommends an annual, very honest, assessment of one's life, focusing on how one has advanced in love of God and neighbor. Much of part V of the Introduction describes such an examination of one's life.

E. St. Francis said one should try to see God's will in all things and practice a divine indifference to success, as long as one knows one is following God's will.

1. The Golden Counsels begin, "Do not look forward to the changes and chances of this life with fear; rather, look upon them with strong hope that, as they arise, God, Whose child you are, will deliver you from them." He goes on to say, "Strive to see God in all things without exception, and consent to His will with absolute submission. . . . Whatever happens, abide steadfastly in a determination to cling simply to God, trusting in His eternal love for you."

2. In the same letter cited above, he points out that the leading cause of sadness in the world is that, like Eve who rejected every other apple in the garden in favor of the one she was tempted, we often ignore all the goods God has given us in favor of some forbidden one. He advised people to accept the good things offered, if they were not excessive or a temptation, but equally to accept the burdens and hardships in front of one, unless they would diminish one's service of God or others. We should, as Jesus says to His disciples, "Eat what is set before you." Luke 10:8.

3. When we ask simply what good can we do, not what could have been available, a divine sweetness enters in, making it easier to do the will of God.

F. However, St. Francis de Sales was not a quietist. He did insist that we must take an active role in advancing morally and spiritually. And so he also advised common sense in the spiritual life, using the practicalities of what works to make the spiritual life work.

1. Thus, for example, he said that one should distinguish carefully between good and bad influences in the world. To the degree that one's friends, co-workers, and other acquaintances have good standards, trying to please them is a good thing, although of course second to God. But, one should be careful of society when it promotes decadence, greed, mediocrity, etc. and avoid any unnecessary things that promote such values.

2. He also advised taking great care about the occasions of sin, such as situations where there is heavy gambling or staying up too late at night, thus both wasting time and opening oneself up to sin.

3. Likewise, in the Introduction, he certainly advises certain mortifications, such as fasting regarding quantity and/or type for a time, but he insists that such mortifications are good only if they help one become more charitable toward others.

4. If one is anxious or afflicted by sadness, St. Francis advises taking the cause to God in prayer and to trusted friends or advisors. He also recommends keeping active with the good things before one as if one were eager about them; the eagerness will eventually follow, an example of what psychologists now call "cognitive dissonance."

5. He also said that we must stand up for the truth and the faith, but do so calmly and gently. One of his mottos was "suaviter sed fortiter," which means kind and well mannered, but also strong and brave. Pope Paul VI said that in St. Francis de Sales "the highest sanctity was united to the greatest affability and good will. He knew how to lead gradually to

the fullness of truth those who had wandered from it." St. Francis himself emphasized how important it is to defend the truth, but in a manner that makes it attractive by good manners, friendliness and courtesy, rather than harshness and anger.

G. Also anticipating the Vatican II Council three and a half centuries later, he was very much was willing to take the advancements of human sciences as good, while insisting that all things must be submitted to God=s grace. He said, AI am as human as anyone could possibly be. @

1. In Subaudiae Gemma, Pope Paul VI pointed out the St. Francis de Sales was well versed in the liberal arts popular in his day and "united the cult of humanism with the mystical ascent and ardor, and in so doing promoted and developed in himself and in his disciples the harmonious progress of all the faculties of man."

2. He also believed that this world was well worthy studying, for it all points to Christ and is meant for the glory of God. He agreed with Blessed Duns Scotus that the Incarnation of the Son of God would have occurred even without sin, saying in his last Christmas sermon, "The heavenly Father planned the creation of the world for the Incarnation of His Son. The end of His work was also His beginning. Divine Wisdom saw from all eternity that the Eternal Word should assume our nature and come into the world. Before Lucifer and the world were created, before our first parents sinned, all this had been determined."

H. In The Introduction to the Devout Life, St. Francis describes a way of daily meditation that involves six steps and includes a prayerful environment, intellect, emotions, will, petition, thanksgiving, and inspiration for continual prayer.

1. The first step is preparation. One tries to find a favorable environment (e.g., the church or a place in one=s home set aside for prayer.) One places oneself in the presence of God by reading a passage from Scripture or another spiritual reading.

2. The second step is consideration. One allows the Holy Spirit to guide one from one aspect of the topic of one=s reading to another in an unhurried fashion.

3. The third step he calls affection. One draws on emotions based upon the considerations, especially with a desire to imitate Jesus.

4. The fourth step is a resolution. One forms a definite resolution (e.g., getting to a task one has been putting off, being kind to a neglected co-worker) to carry during the next day.
5. The fifth step is thanking God for guidance and asking for the grace to carry out the resolution.
6. The sixth step is taking from prayer a *Aspiritual bouquet*, @ i.e., a few thoughts, images or phrases to recall throughout the day.