

The "Real" Story on St. Francis de Sales

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Francis de Sales (1567-1622), the Bishop of Geneva whom Pope Paul VI called "one of the greatest figures of the Church and of history." His rich and holy life, the twenty-six volumes of his writings we have preserved, the 400-old tradition of Salesian spirituality that is the subject of this issue - admittedly, this is a story not so easily condensed! Nevertheless, it is a story worth telling, and this paper begins to do so by gathering together some lesser-known tidbits of his life, anecdotes that I believe will make him more "real" to believers today. Not that the numerous hagiographies are "false," but I think a more realistic story can be told that may give him more relevance to you and me. To this end, I would like to introduce this saint by focusing on five aspects of his remarkable life: student, priest, bishop, founder, spiritual director.

The Student

Born in 1567, the first of thirteen children in an aristocratic family in the Savoy region (today's southern Switzerland and southeastern France), young Francis was educated in the finer institutions of his time and place. At the College d'Annecy, he studied the French language, which he would learn so well that to this day his writings are studied in university courses on French literature. In Paris he undertook a thoroughly liberal arts curriculum, which also entailed learning lessons of nobility, like horsemanship, fencing, and dancing. Add to this education a flavorful dose of Jesuit spirituality, and he would become that "honnête homme" (Wright) who reflects all that is good about the Renaissance. At the University of Padua he learned the finer points of Law, earning a double doctorate in Civil Law and Canon Law around the age of twenty-five. And, in both university cities, he also undertook, on his own initiative, the study of theology. In sum, as one of his law professors, Guido Pancirolo, attested: "Those who judged him more devout than learned were astonished that he was as learned as he was devout" (Ravier, 42).

Along the way, however, his holiness and his education would collide. Both in Paris and in Padua, he was personally troubled by the problem of predestination. The theological dilemma of God's foreknowledge hit home, with the force of a sledgehammer upon his soul, in 1586. For a six-week period he suffered a personal "crisis" - what today we might call clinical depression - in which he feared that he would be eternally damned. No one can determine for sure what actually caused such a traumatic event in Francis' young life. It may have been physical fatigue, the energy of his many youthful endeavors finally wearing him out. It may have been intellectual consternation, the theological debates just not sitting well with him. It may have been a psychological complex, his naturally high anxiety yielding its destructive force on his delicate conscience. Whatever the cause, this crisis would prove to be a spiritual "conversion" for Francis. Only after his prayer of abandonment to God's will, made before the statue of Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance, was he relieved. And from then on, he no longer sought holiness in the naïveté of romantic fervor; instead, he realized that whatever good he

can muster, and whatever bad he might suffer, are far and away surpassed by the mercy of God.

Therein lies a profound and endearing lesson. Francis de Sales would learn to see life through eyes of hope and would later counsel folks about the vagaries of human existence in such a way that both reflected and inspired optimism. Without, hopefully, enduring the same pain, we could learn from this, too - that fatigue comes with hard work, that consternation comes with critical thinking, and that anxiety comes with caring so much. Yet these need not be cause for crisis, not if we believe, as we should, that God's love for us, personally and not just conceptually, surpasses the transitory ups and downs of our existence. In truth, there is really nothing we can do to make God love us more.

The Priest

With such a first-rate education, Francis de Sales was soon admitted to the bar and was nominated a senator by the duke, two steps along the way of a father's dream that his son embark on a diplomatic career. Yet Francis refused the title. Instead, he was named Provost of the cathedral chapter of Geneva, a quasi-political position that put him second in rank to the local bishop. This appointment may have assuaged his father's aspirations, but it also signaled to Francis that he should alight upon an ecclesiastical career. To that end, he was ordained to the priesthood at age twenty-six and volunteered for a "missionary" assignment to the region of the Chablais, which by that time had become so thoroughly Calvinist that "(o)f the some twenty-five thousand souls who inhabited the area, only about a hundred Catholics remained" (Ravier, 62). The force of Protestant policy, which prohibited public interaction with the papist preacher (Winklehner), would prove to be no match for the rhetorical skills of this saint. Through dialogues with local leaders, including dinner-time discussions that almost converted Calvin's successor (Theodore de Beze), through public liturgical celebrations, and through an ingenious means of pamphleteering (for which he was later named Patron of Journalists), Francis de Sales re-converted the entire region, some 72,000 in all.

Underlying this priestly passion and ecumenical endeavor is something more than oratorical skill. Francis de Sales had courage. In following a priestly vocation, he defied his father - not the kind of thing a first-born son would normally do. At his son's request to be permitted to enter into the service of the Church, Francis' father wept, acceded, and then shut himself away in his study (Ravier). Later, in taking on the heretical opposition, he defied convention. In fact, his opening speech to the cathedral chapter, that ecclesiastical body which led the citizenry by pride and prestige, would signal the source of the saint's success. In what had to be a rather gutsy maneuver, he began his keynote address with a veritable call to arms by claiming, "At last the day has dawned! We must reconquer Geneva, the ancient seat of our assembly." Enthused and inflamed, his audience could not have seen what was coming next.

It is our fault if the name of the Lord is blasphemed among the nations, and of this, God through his prophets bitterly complains. Such are the waters of contradiction, which in my opinion, renews the ardor of heretics. ... I beg of you, fellow combatants, to check the flow of

this water; let each one of us watch his own source and prevent it reaching the enemy; let the flow of our sinful actions surge back to their origin, and there evaporate in the heat of our Eternal Sun to deprive our enemy, as well as our people, of the spectacle of our scandals. ... Breach the walls of Geneva with our ardent prayers and storm the city with mutual charity. Our front lines must wield the weapons of Love" (Oeuvres VII:100,107- 110).

The lesson here is rather clear. Following God's call takes courage. Following God's way - the way of perfect charity - takes courage. Francis de Sales' ecumenical endeavors, and subsequent transformation of an entire culture, depended not on his own oratorical skills or political savvy, helpful though these no doubt were. What counted most, both in his becoming who he was to be and in his doing what he was to do, is a sure and certain reliance on the power of God. His achievements may have redounded to his own glory, but his motivation was always and only to do what God willed. If we would but keep this goal in mind, we can be assured that our work cannot, ultimately, fail.

The Bishop

On December 8, 1602 Francis de Sales was consecrated Bishop of Geneva. Committed to spreading the teaching of the Council of Trent, he would use his position to educate his diocese in the doctrines of the Church. He preached frequently, too much so for some high-brow tastes (like his father's), and his sermons became known for their manifold eloquence. He organized diocesan synods, reorganized administrative structures, and initiated the practice of parish visitations, twice visiting the entirety of his diocese (with horseback as his only mode of transportation). He also formed the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) and personally taught catechism classes, even to the point of inventing a type of sign language by which he taught prayers to a young man born deaf (for which he would later be named Patron of the Deaf). He was, without doubt, a very personable pastor beloved by all in his flock.

But there were administrative troubles, too. Religious life in his diocese was in a sorry state. To use the saint's words, from his letter to the Holy Apostolic See, "the regular discipline is everywhere ruined in the abbeys and priories" by crass ignorance, putrid incontinence, avarice, and insolent arrogance (Oeuvres XXIII:325). Despite their resistance, which was often tied to financial concerns, the bishop was able to reform the monastic orders by re-instituting penitential practices. Then, too, his establishment of a new educational entity - the Florimontane Academy - would be short-lived. This school was to serve "all the gallant masters of the honorable arts ... including painters, sculptors, carpenters, architects, and the like" with lessons in politics, philosophy, mathematics, the sciences, and the aesthetics of language (Oeuvres XXIV:242-247). (Some believe it to be the pre-cursor of today's French Academy.) But it existed for only three years, one reason for its demise being the three lawsuits in which the bishop came to be embroiled.

We find here another lesson. Beyond the fact that even saints get sued is the realization that people are perplexing! It would have been easy for the bishop to avoid the degradations and the complications of diocesan affairs, by removing himself to the safe confines of an episcopal mansion or hiding behind increased layers of bureaucratic structure. But Francis de Sales

practiced a very direct and personal "contact" with all the people in his care, commoner and scholar alike, saints and sinners together. And not everything he did was a success. Sometimes even the best-laid plans fail. So be it. He, and we, must move on, confident that the good Lord will provide.

The Founder

One venture Francis de Sales initiated did succeed ... and still does today. In 1610, together with Jane de Chantal, he founded the Visitation of Holy Mary, a religious order of women whose aim was the life of charity exemplified in the Virgin Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. This new order was uniquely conceived. It was established not on the traditional vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, but always and everywhere on charity: "We have no bond but the bond of love," Francis wrote in the first Book of Profession. And, rather than focusing on stringent practices of mortification behind the walls of the monastery, as was common in religious orders of the time, these sisters would actually go out into the city, to visit and care for the sick. This new religious lifestyle attracted many women who would not otherwise have been able to join the convent; older women, widows, even the disabled were given access to this way of life. Today, twelve monasteries of Visitation Sisters remain active in the USA.

Behind this success story, however, is another story, one that combines acquiescence and firmness. When the Visitation order sought to expand its foundations beyond the diocese of Geneva, the founding saints encountered resistance, in the "conservative" thinking of the bishop of Lyons (Mgr. Denys Simon de Marquemont). This neighboring prelate could not envision a break with Church tradition that would allow cloistered nuns to venture in and out of the monastery, no matter the good deeds they were seeking to do. Francis de Sales acquiesced to the demand that his Sisters observe the canonical enclosure and submit to a monastic Rule of life. After all, his emphasis for these nuns was not on what they did in terms of apostolic activity, but on the humble and gentle spirit with which they were to cultivate a prayerful life of obedience to God's will. Nevertheless, he stood his ground when it came to the question of how these Sisters were to live. To this day, the nuns in Visitation monasteries practice a simple life, without pious austerities, yet fervent in their quest for spiritual perfection. They, and they alone among cloistered orders in the Church, still welcome women into the enclosure for weekend retreats.

The lesson in this for us is one of flexibility. We plan ahead. We strategize and prioritize. We design ways to grow and develop and, hopefully, succeed in what we do. But things change. Some things are beyond our control. To progress through life with peace, Francis de Sales gives us this gem of psychological and spiritual advice in a little work entitled *The Spiritual Directory*: They who wish to thrive and advance in the way of Our Lord should, at the beginning of their actions, both exterior and interior, ask for his grace and offer to his divine Goodness all the good they will do. In this way they will be prepared to bear with peace and serenity all the pain and suffering they [may] encounter as coming from the fatherly hand of our good God and Savior. His most holy intention is to have them merit by such means in

order to reward them afterwards out of the abundance of his love. ... [In this way], everything they do will be done in God's name to please him alone (article 1).

The Spiritual Director

In addition to the Visitation monasteries that now dot the world's landscape, what endures of the life of St. Francis de Sales are his writings. Chief among these, by virtue of the fact that it continues to be one of the top ten selling religious books of all time, is his Introduction to the Devout Life. Compiled from a series of letters he had written to one of his innumerable spiritual "daughters," this devotional guide employs plain language and vivid imagery "to teach those who are living in towns, at court, in their own households, and whose calling obliges them to a social life, so far as externals are concerned. ... [that] even so a true steadfast soul may live in the world untainted by worldly breath, finding a well-spring of holy piety amid the bitter waves of society, and hovering amid the flames of earthly lusts without singeing the wings of its devout life." (preface). Radically novel at the time, his work suggests that holiness is not the purview of monks and nuns alone; on the contrary, each and every one of us is called to perfection, in and through our particular state in life, by obeying the will of God "carefully, frequently, and promptly." In this way, as Pope Paul VI proclaimed, "No one ... more than St. Francis de Sales anticipated the deliberations and decisions of the Second Vatican Council with such a keen and progressive insight."

This famous book is the "face" by which many know St. Francis de Sales. Behind that, though, is a depth of spiritual understanding that permeates the over 10,000 letters of spiritual direction that he wrote. There we see him at his pastoral best - instructing, exhorting, consoling, comforting and otherwise dealing with the myriad problems of life and love, of virtue and sin, of sickness and death that people faced and about which they asked him for advice. Sometimes, and seemingly contrary to "the gentleman saint" that he is portrayed to be, we can glimpse the flame of a passion that he worked his whole life to regulate. Consider this letter from June 1611, recently discovered, which he addressed to his dear friend, Antoine Favre:

It is true that nothing has angered me for a longtime like the report that I received from you regarding the indignity committed between this dishonest young man and this poor girl. [Apparently, one of Favre's daughters had been, as they say, deflowered!] ... If this vicious young man had desired to mitigate this misfortune by marriage, which I did not fail to urge him to do as my duty required, I would have detained him longer, despite my repugnance, in order to be of some help. But when I heard the offensive words with which he defended himself, and the invectives he used to express his shameful feelings for this young woman, I threw him out, even though I saw that he was without any resources, without dynamism and without judgment. It would be impossible to get a dowry or anything else from him. Otherwise I would have forced myself to overcome my feelings, and kept on talking to him until we had come to a conclusion, although it would have been disagreeable for me. May God deliver me from such encounters!

Most likely, we have all uttered a similar prayer! And therein we can find our final lesson. Saints, we believe, are heroically virtuous. Doctors of the Church, we proclaim, are theologically astute. Francis de Sales is clearly both. Yet his wisdom is rightly described as "inspired common sense" (Stopp). He experienced mystical heights and led others to sanctity, yet he did so amid the everyday and ordinary experiences of our common human existence. That existence, our existence, is divinely ordained but it remains completely human - magnificent yet mortal, inspired yet inept, eternal yet elusive, fascinating yet feeble. To strive for holiness, while also confessing as Francis once did, that we are as human as everyone else is (Thy Will Be Done, 124), remains our lot in life. Or, in the words of one of his innumerable aphorisms: "Our imperfections are going to accompany us to the grave; we cannot move or go anywhere without having our feet touch the ground" (Letters of Spiritual Direction, 98). We are who we are, and so are others. And God's love embraces both. Conclusion There is much more, to be sure. For now, readers of this journal can learn much from the articles presented here. Most of all, we continue to learn from Francis de Sales: optimistic amid crises, courageous in the face of challenges, personable to one and all alike, flexible yet firm, and passionate with his good friends ... this, to me, is a real saint!

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