



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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The Sternness of the Gentle Francis de Sales (1567-1622)

paper presented at the Salesian Scholars' Seminar
Stella Niagara (NY), 23-26 October 2008

a revised version is published in
All By Love: New Vistas in Theological Spirituality
[festschrift in honour of Prof. Dr. Antony Mookenthottam, MSFS]
edited by Jose Maniparampil & K. Henry Jose, MSFS
Bangalore, India: Tejas Vidya Peetha, 2011, pages 199-218.

The title of this study is not intended to be provocative but rather informative—to help gain a greater insight into the nature of gentleness and its relationship to anger and sternness in the life and teaching of the saint. In attempting to refine the portrait of a great saint, it is not our intention to give the gentle Doctor of Love a nose of wax which we can shape and mold to suit our fancy. Nonetheless, with the passing a years, it is easy to lose sight of certain features that have been blurred or overlooked in trying to make him conform to a too idealized and perhaps unrealistic view of his personality. It is our goal and our hope that by examining and analyzing more closely his teachings and behavior relevant to the virtue of gentleness, especially a fresh source which shows an unusual and uncharacteristic side of the saint, we may be able to present a more rounded portrait of him. It can make us better understand the cost and the difficulty of attaining true gentleness, give us a deeper appreciation of what this virtue meant to the saint, and its implications for our lives today.

The Gentleness of Francis de Sales

First, we should review in a cursory manner how greatly Francis de Sales cherished and valued the virtue of gentleness and the great importance it has in his spirituality. The French word he uses for this virtue is *douceur* or *suavité*. Unfortunately the word “*douceur*” is frequently translated as “sweetness” or “meekness.”¹ Neither of these, in most instances, appropriately captures the meaning which the saint desires to convey. It is very revealing to note how the saint views the Incarnation. He describes it as the perfect communication of gentleness: “This supreme Gentleness (*Douceur*) was also so perfectly communicated outside of the Trinity that the created nature and the divinity, while keeping their own properties, were nonetheless so joined together that they were one sole person”² So the Incarnation is conceived by the saint as God having communicated to us Gentleness itself. For him, the essence of the God-man or the Word made flesh is characterized by gentleness. This idea appears also in the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, where Francis, after the manner of St. Augustine, urges the devout person to invoke God as “O Ancient Gentleness! (*O douceur ancienne*). Why did I not savor you sooner!”³

Francis never gives a definition of the virtue of *douceur* or gentleness. Unfortunately, certain translators by translating the word French word *douceur* as “sweetness” or “meekness” do not add any clarity to the saint’s thought on this virtue. The word “meekness” in common American English parlance has a pejorative connotation and implies lacking in spirit or courage, spineless, and gutless, submissive; it conjures up a Caspar Milquetoast, the comic strip character created by H.T. Webster who was a timid, meek, and unassertive person. Francis describes the virtue of gentleness as “the flower of charity” and alludes to St. Bernard’s seeing it as reflecting the excellence of charity.⁴ As the “flower of charity,” gentleness can be understood in de Sales’ eyes as charity or love in bloom.

Throughout all of his writings, in his life and teaching, the saint emphasized and reemphasized the two virtues of humility and gentleness. They were for him the two virtues that make us most closely resemble and live Jesus. The words of Jesus, “Learn of me for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Mt. 16:18) are at the very heart of his spirituality because they make our

¹ “*Douceur*, ‘*doux*,’ and ‘*suave*,’ words that St. Francis de Sales repeats over and over in reference to God’s love for us and things that relate to it, become ‘sweetness’ and ‘sweet’ in English and sometimes sound strange to our coarsened ears. When we see or hear them in his context, we must be on our guard against giving them the sensual and sentimental meanings of a debased contemporary usage. By such terms he wishes to describe all that is truly good and rightly cherished and held dear, all that is lovely, loving, and lovable, all that is merciful, mild, and kind, all that is most gentle even when most firm, all that checks and disciplines only to cleanse, strengthen, and save, all that wishes only our good and seeks only to help us and to bring us to what we should be, all that is bright and joyous in itself and that alone can bring joy and peace to men’s hearts,” in J.K. Ryan, “Translator’s Introduction”, in *Treatise On the Love of God*, (Stella Niagara, N.Y.: DeSales Resource Center, 2006), 25-26. Despite this caution, the full import of the original French words are lost on most readers of the English translations of his works.

² François de Sales, *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, Edition Complète, 27 vols. (Annecy: J. Niérat et al., 1892-1964), 4:100. Hereafter OEA. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated.

³ OEA, 3:342. Ryan translates this line as “O Sweetness! Why did I not relish you before.” *Introduction to a Devout Life*, trans. and ed. J.K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1972), Part 5, chap. 2. Here again, the notion of God as gentleness is lost on the average reader.

⁴ Ryan, 1972, Part 3, chap. 8. See S. Bernardi Claravallensis, *Liber seu Tractatus de Charitate*, chap. 5: “Cum te arguit, mitis est; cum blanditur, simplex est: pie solet saevire, sine dolo mulcere; patienter novit irasci, humiliter indignari; laesa non provocatur, spreta revocat,” <http://www.binetti.ru/bernardus/108.shtml>.

hearts beat in rhythm with the heart of Jesus. He firmly believed that: “Our Lord based his whole teaching on these words.”⁵ His well-known saying, “humility perfects us with respect to God and gentleness with regard to our neighbor”⁶ reveals the interrelatedness of these virtues and their great importance.

In founding with St. Jane de Chantal the order of the Visitation, he desired to instill it with the spirit of humility and gentleness. “I have always considered that [the spirit of the Visitation] is a profound humility towards God, and of great gentleness with our neighbor; the more so because, treating the body with less severity it must all the more foster kindness of heart.... The spirit of gentleness is so absolutely the spirit of the Visitation, that anyone who should wish to introduce into it any more austerities than there are at present, would instantly destroy the Visitation.”⁷

Francis not only taught gentleness and worked arduously and ceaselessly to instill it in others, he lived it to an extraordinary degree. His very close friend, confidante and admirer, Jean-Pierre Camus (1584-1652) wrote: “With regard to gentleness,...it seemed that this virtue in him appeared in human form and that he was rather gentleness itself than a man endowed with this virtue.” So Camus saw him as the very embodiment of gentleness and believed that this is why he had such a great influence over others of bringing them around “to God’s service and in the way of salvation” because this virtue made him all things to all people.⁸ It seems to Camus that the more the saint was harassed, “the more tranquil he was...This Samson gathered honey from the mouth of lions and found peace amid war...He found oil in the rock and gentleness in the most bitter bitterness.... He drew his salvation from enemies and found refuge like Jonah in the belly of the whale.”⁹

Citing a few incidents from the saint’s life should help remind us of the outstanding reputation the saint enjoyed for his gentleness and appreciate all the more Camus’s colorful assessment.

One day Francis met on one of the streets of Annecy “a man who was trying to do him in. He said to him: ‘I am told you wish me harm. I can promise you that even if you had put out one of my eyes, I would still look kindly upon you with the other.’”¹⁰ Imagine the courage and strength needed to walk up to your enemy and disarm him with such a gentle, kind and sincere remark! He evidently was following here what he confided to Camus, viz., “Isn’t it true that one

⁵ OEA, 14:105

⁶ Ryan, 1972, Part 3, chap. 8.

⁷ Francis de Sales, *Spiritual Conferences of St. Francis de Sales*, trans. Abbot Gasquet and D. Mackey (Westminster, MD.: Newman Bookshop, 1945), 240-41. See also pp. 250-51.

⁸ Jean-Pierre Camus, *L'Esprit de S. François de Sales, eveque et prince de Geneve de divers ecrits de M Jean-Pierre Camus, evêque de Bellay, ouvrage qui contient les plus beaux endroits de ses ecrits, & qui renferme des instructions propres à toutes sortes de personnes*, nouvelle édition par M. P. C. Docteur de Sorbonne (Avignon: Libraires Associés, 1775), 390. For the reliability of Camus, see Alexander Pocetto, "Jean Pierre Camus (1584-1652) as Disseminator of Salesian Spirituality," <http://www.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/PocettoCamus.pdf> or “Jean-Pierre Camus (1584-1652), ein Vermittler des salesianischen Geistes,” *Jahrbuch für Salesianschen Studien*, Eichstätt, 34 (2002).

⁹ Camus, 325.

¹⁰ E.J. Lajeunie, O.P., *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, The Thinker, His Influence*, trans. Rory O’Sullivan, OSFS, 2 vols. (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1986), 2:111.

good breeze carries a ship farther than a hundred oars? Hence, one kind word wins more willing service than a hundred harsh words or stern reproofs.”¹¹

After being greatly insulted by a Knight of Malta for not giving a benefice to one of his servants, “the bishop’s brother ...asked him how it was he had not lost his temper, and the Saint confessed that ‘at the time and many other times he was seething with anger like water in a pot boiling over the fire but that by the grace of God, even if the violent efforts to resist such passion endangered his life...he would not let himself go.’”¹² Camus describes this encounter a bit differently. When asked by an ecclesiastic, who witnessed the verbal abuse that this man heaped upon the saint, if he had any feelings at all, the saint replied: “I used diversionary tactics,...for I set my mind to thinking about the good qualities of this person whose friendship I favored with so much gentleness, and I hope that when this bad humor passes and this misunderstanding dissipates, that the day will come when he will look upon me with serenity.”¹³ This account helps us understand one of the strategies the saint used to overcome strong feelings of anger and accords perfectly with the saint’s conception of virtue, which he sees as not simply the absence of its opposite vice, but of positive actions demonstrating it under challenging situations.¹⁴ We will say more about this below.

Camus relates an incident when the saint was criticized for being too gentle and indulgent with a young man who seriously offended his own mother and finally wound up dying in a duel. People thought that he would give the young man a firm correction but did not speak evil of him as his mother did. In response, the saint explained: “What did you want me to do in the matter?...I did what I could to arm myself with an anger that was not sinful. I took my heart in my two hands, but I did not have the courage to dress him down. To tell you the truth, I was afraid of losing in a quarter of an hour this little bit of liquid of gentleness which I have attempted to gather for twenty-two years, drop by drop like dew in the vessel of my puny heart.”¹⁵ So the saint saw it as a judgment call that did not pan out favorably.

Francis advised his brother, Jean-François, on how to react to a letter slandering him and the bishop: “These good people [wrote] a letter [which] they showed here and there secretly. It appears that they will do all they can to disparage the small favors that they see coming our way; but you must not worry, but answer only by doing good to those who slander you. It is a better way of annoying them than to fight back.”¹⁶

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Camus, *The Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*, ed. and trans. C.F.Kelley (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 68. Hereafter Kelley.

¹² Lajeunie, 2:113, citing *Année Sainte*, 5 Sept., 1607, 362-363.

¹³ Camus, 393.

¹⁴ See *Treatise on the Love of God*, Bk. 11, chap. 7 where he distinguishes between certain natural inclinations and virtues.

¹⁵ Camus, 36. The saint expressed a similar idea in a different context. On one occasion, the way he conducted himself with a rowdy group who were interfering with the building of the Visitation monastery, St. Jane reproached him: “Your gentleness,” she said to him, “will increase the insolence of these mischievous people. ‘*Not at all, not at all,*’ he answered, *besides dear daughter, would you like me to destroy in a quarter of an hour of anger the little edifice of interior peace I have been building up patiently for myself for the last eighteen years.*’ Michel Favre reports the same thus: ‘Would you like me to lose in a few minutes the little gentleness that I have had much trouble in acquiring in twenty years’” in Lajeunie, 2: 126. We shall see that in the matter of interfering with the building of the new monastery, he did exhibit some sternness.

¹⁶ Lajeunie, 2: 130. See OEA, 19: 81-82.

His Struggles with the Passion of Anger

We have already seen in some of the examples above that the practice of gentleness did not come easily for him, especially when he tells about the inner turmoil caused by angry feelings that welled up within him. On one occasion, he says he was “seething with anger” inside and on several other occasions he was afraid of losing in fifteen minutes what it took him years to acquire. He admitted to Camus that the two passions that gave him the greatest difficulty were love and anger. “With regard to the passion of anger to which he was inclined, he fought it head on and with such strength and courage, or, to state it better, with such effort and constancy that this appeared visibly at his death. When they opened up his body, some stones were found in his gall bladder.”¹⁷ The doctors, Camus tells us, explained the presence of these little stones as resulting from the very vehement efforts he made to control this passion. Then Camus makes this fanciful comment, becoming almost rhapsodic: “O stones from David’s bread bag, how many giants, that is, impetuous assaults of anger, have you felled? O stones from which run water, oil and honey, and which demonstrate the great power of grace over nature, the grace that sometimes changes stones into honey and sometimes also honey into stone.”¹⁸

This rather baroque comparison with its allusions to two noteworthy incidents of the OT –David felling Goliath, water and honey coming from the rock as the Israelites wandered in the desert–is instructive for our purposes. *Miel* or honey signified for both the saint and Camus gentleness or sweetness. This calls to mind the very well-known saying attributed to the saint but found only in Camus: “Always be as indulgent as you can, never forgetting that one can catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a hundred barrels of vinegar.”¹⁹ Now in Camus’ mind, not only can hard and difficult situations and events signified by the stones be softened by gentleness, but gentleness itself through grace can also become as hard or as stern as stone. This is an interesting take on the way one of the Francis’ closest friends, who greatly admired the saint’s extraordinary gentleness, saw occasions where sternness or firmness might be called for by God’s grace. As we will see below, Camus personally experienced the turning of “honey into stone.”

So Francis was apparently hot-blooded by nature and throughout his lifetime. As late as 1619, “he admitted to a friend: ‘I very nearly let go of my anger, and intentionally I was obliged to grip my anger by the scruff of the neck’ and that he had to take the reins in both hands to hold it back.’ . . . ‘However, much I have been in the right,’ he confessed, ‘I have never shown anger without discovering afterwards that I would have done better by not showing it’ So he had shown anger!”²⁰ We shall see evidence of this on several notable occasions.

The Saint’s Sternness

After bringing a lawsuit against a recalcitrant priest for refusing to appear when summoned several times, the saint was criticized by the Countess de Tournon, who supported the priest, for being too harsh toward him. In responding to her, Francis writes to call “harsh the

¹⁷ Camus, 206.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁹ Kelley, 23.

²⁰ Lajeunie, 2: 133.

lawsuits against a man who, for the last few months, had ignored with total impunity the summons served on him,” is “harshness itself.”²¹ This letter is exceedingly interesting regarding the firmness and sternness with which he defends his rights as a bishop to govern his priests and have them fulfill their priestly responsibilities against powerful nobles who would interfere on their behalf. He does not hesitate to criticize both the Count and the Countess for undermining his authority as bishop. So the saint does not mince any words here and is clearly harsh and stern in this very important matter. In so many words, he tells her to mind her own business and stop meddling in matters that pertain to the proper administration of his diocese even though the Tournon family provided the financial support for this priest and his parish!

When the occasion called for it, Francis was not beyond reprimanding people from the pulpit. One of his earliest biographers recounts his sternness from the pulpit: “He scolded from the pulpit the young nobleman, a relation of his, who forgot the respect due to the holy building, ‘[and] was making eyes, in unwonted fashion at a young lady’....The two love-struck young people at a pre-arranged moment, ‘by signs and shaking of their heads’ were distracting the congregation; they shocked the more devout and set their friends laughing. The Prelate suddenly angrily reprimanded the culprits, showed his severity saying: ‘Enough! What is this? [Where] do you think we are? If you continue to scandalize people in public, I will call your names out and admonish you publicly.’”²²

The incident of a vociferous group of people who interfered with the construction of the Visitation monastery was evidently an emotional encounter for the saint. “The Prelate [in this affair] had showed ‘some emotion’ and his anger was ‘described’ to Father de Quoex. He protested: ‘I am only a weak man, subject to passion; but by the grace of God, since I have been a shepherd, I have never let myself be carried away and uttered angry words against my flock.’”²³

One of the footnotes on this letter is very revealing of the saint’s sternness. Mère de Chaugy in *l’Histoire de la Fondation du 1er Monastère d’Annecy* (1641) recounts how some men were hacking away with axes at the scaffolding of the new monastery building. The saint was called and said to one of them three or four times: “‘Friend, stop, stop, please.’ – Seeing that it was having no effect, he gently took the axe from the man, and then with a stern look, joined with a majestic gentleness, authority and episcopal courage, he strongly reprimanded the man, making him understand that if he were unaware of the extent of the bishop’s authority over all those in his diocese, then he would soon experience it.” He threatened to report the religious involved to his Superior and called the Bailiff for the layman. He added, “But I did not do anything in this matter that I should not have done, and I would always do it in a similar situation.”²⁴

When a person requested a dispensation which was not in the saint’s power to give, the man persisted and told him that the saint had the power but just wasn’t well disposed toward him to give it. Camus describes the saint’s disposition on such occasions as follows: “The Blessed

²¹ Ibid., 2:113, citing the saint’s letter.

²² Lajeunie, 2: 112.

²³ Ibid., 2:136-37; OEA, 18: 6.

²⁴ OEA, 18: 6.

one who was unbending on such occasions was forced to refuse him flat out.”²⁵ After trying to explain with great patience and gentleness to this person the injustice of such a request, the saint remained unbending and firm or even stern. So he was not always pliable nor a pushover as some might be inclined to interpret his gentleness and kindness.

In the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, the saint gives advice on how to correct others. He stresses that gentleness, that is reason unaccompanied by passion, is the most effective because passion can tyrannize but reason accompanied by gentleness is much more effective: “By nature the reasonable soul is subject to reason and therefore it is never subject to passion except through tyranny.”²⁶ There are times, however, when sternness, firmness and even harshness are called for by charity itself in giving corrections. The saint specifically allows for both harsh treatment of ourselves and of others when a calm, gentle, reasonable approach does not work: “However, if anyone finds that his heart is not sufficiently moved, he may use a sharp, severe reproach and rebuke so as to excite it to deeper sorrow,” but on condition that we have a lively confidence in God.²⁷

Although this principle is articulated with regard to dealing with our own faults, imperfections and shortcomings, the saint evidently gives a wider application in trying to correct or bring others around. There are two notable examples of this. The first is a rather interesting and recently discovered one from a previously unpublished letter to his friend Antoine Favre. The letter is brief but very revealing. Here is the pertinent section:

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. I owe special honor and respect to those dear to you and to *Madame, our Prsident*, for many reasons. So, if it were possible, I would exchange this misfortune for a painful wound in my body to relieve this dear sister of the excessive sorrow, which I now see in her soul. 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, 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 drive 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.²⁸

²⁵ Camus, 442.

²⁶ Ryan, 1972, Part 3, chap. 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Part 3, chap. 9.

²⁸ Sr. Mary Patricia Burns, VHM, “Three Unpublished Letters of St. Francis de Sales to Antoine Favre, First President of the Sovereign Senate of Savoy,” trans. Alexander Pocetto, OSFS, from the French: “Trois Lettres

The saint was angered because the young man got one of Antoine Favre's daughters pregnant and would not accept any responsibility whatsoever for his actions. He tried to reason with him and impress upon him the seriousness of what he had done without obviously having any effect on him. Uncharacteristically, he calls him "this vicious young man" and threw him out. The values and beliefs he cherishes are revealed by the unaccustomed anger he displayed on this occasion. It is aroused not because of any personal affront or insult but because of how highly he regarded and valued his friendship with Antoine Favre and also because he profoundly believed that people should accept responsibility for their actions. The anger that he experienced when reading the report his friend sent him very likely did not dispose him to treat the young man with his customary kindness and gentleness. When the saint tells us that he urged the young man to marry the woman he had violated, it apparently indicates that he was even in favor of a "shot-gun wedding." This letter makes us see another side of the saint and appreciate the constant struggle he personally had in dealing with the passion of anger and the difficulty in practicing the virtue of gentleness in the face of certain challenging situations.

The other example of a stern correction occurred with his dear friend, Jean-Pierre Camus. Once when Camus complained to the saint about someone who greatly wronged him, here is how Francis sternly reprimanded him for complaining and feeling sorry for himself: "'Anyone but you,' he said, 'I should try to comfort. But your position and the pure love which I hold for you, dispense me from this act of courtesy. I have no oil to pour into your wound, and perhaps, were I to sympathize with you, it might only add to the inflammation. I have nothing but vinegar and salt to pour in, and I must simply put into practice the advice of the Apostle: 'Reprove, entreat.'"

Camus, stung by this response, says that he had recourse to the saint as a child goes to a loving father. The saint, however, continues his stern correction: "You indeed are a child!" he answered. "How long do you expect to go on clinging to your childhood? Is it right that one who is the father of others, one who is a Bishop in God's Church should be so childish? Does not St. Paul tell us that when we are children we may speak as children, but not when we are become men?" In other words, the saint tells Camus without sparing his ego: "Grow up!"

When Camus objects that it was evil men and not God that caused him this wrong, the saint reminds him of God's permissive will and what happened to Job. He anticipates Camus's response: "But Father, how is it that you have become so harsh, and have changed your gentleness into cruelty, as Job says to almighty God—Where is your unfailing kindness?" Francis responds to his rhetorical question that what moved him to give this stern and harsh correction was the great love that he has for him. In today's terms, we would call this 'tough love,' one that motivates us to speak the unvarnished truth to others for whom we have a great affection and who matter a great deal to us. So this incident is another indication when sternness and harshness are called for and runs counter to the advice he gives about using gentleness and persuasion

Inédites de Saint François de Sales à Antoine Favre, Premier Président du Souverain Sénat de Savoie," in *Actes du XXXVIIe Congrès des Sociétés Savantes de Savoie, 19 et 20 septembre 1998*. Académie Chablaisienne. The translation is available online at: <http://www.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/Letters-Favre.pdf>. Sr. Mary Patricia verifies the authenticity of these letters.

when correcting others. Camus got absolutely no sympathy on this occasion from the saint but rather a severe rebuke.²⁹

Interestingly, the saint tells Camus, “perhaps, were I to sympathize with you, it might only add to the inflammation.” His approach here brings to mind the well-known expression: “The more I think about it, the madder I get.” Francis did not want Camus to dwell on the injury and nurse his wounds. He evidently believed that sympathizing with him would only make matters worse and perhaps fan the flames of anger. Camus thought that in talking it over with his friend, he would get some sympathy. This is what is known as the talk-it-out strategy. Many people believe that this strategy is helpful for overcoming feelings of anger. However, modern psychological research shows otherwise. A psychologist who has studied recent research on anger explodes some very common myths about anger. One of them is that talking it out makes you less angry. “Who would disagree?” she remarks. “Like most people I know, I have always been a firm believer in the talk-it-out strategy. Talking things over makes you feel better. That’s what friends are for. That’s what therapists are for. That’s what bartenders are for. But that’s not what the research shows. Talking out an emotion doesn’t reduce it, *it rehearses it.*”

Why does this author say that talking out an emotion like anger does not ordinarily diminish it but rather increases it? It has to do with the complex nature of human emotions and the interplay between the limbic part of our brain where feelings are channeled and the prefrontal cortex, the area where reason holds sway. She explains it in the following manner: “Emotions are social constructions: the physiological arousal that we feel depends on cues from the environment to provide a label and justification. Talking to friends is one way to find that label, to decide, for example, that you feel angry instead of hurt, or more sad than jealous. Sympathetic friends who agree with your self-diagnosis, or who provide a diagnosis when you have none, are aiding that process of emotional definition.”³⁰

In seeking to justify the feeling and to give it a name, it has to be elaborated on by our intellect or our reason. This interaction between the emotional side of our being and the cerebral or intellectual fits in nicely with the theory of the passions espoused by Francis de Sales. Let me explain.

Cognitive Emotions

For Francis de Sales, emotions or passions are more than social constructions because, as we shall show, they are also shaped and controlled by our spiritual and religious beliefs and values. In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales makes a clear distinction between a passion and an affection. For him, a passion is a movement of the sense appetite and an affection

²⁹ Camus, 146-47.

³⁰ Carol Tavris, *Anger, The Misunderstood Emotion* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1982), 131-32. She does admit that talking it out can at times be cathartic, provided that it makes us come to grips with the cause(s) of our anger. Francis gives common sense advice that accords with modern psychological findings. He tells us: “Above all, do not complain to irascible and fault-finding people. If there is 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 love God. Instead of calming your mind, the others will stir up worse difficulties,” in Ryan, 1972, Part 3, chap. 3.

a movement of the rational appetite or of the will.³¹ However, this distinction is not always easy to determine. When describing the passions themselves in that same work, the saint, by implication, considers them to emerge from our thought processes. What some contemporary theologians, philosophers and psychologists would call “cognitive emotions.”³² For example, the saint states: “If a good is considered in itself as to its natural goodness, it arouses love, the first and principal passion. If a good is considered as something absent from us, it arouses us to a desire for it....If we decide that we can obtain it, we begin to have hope. If we think we cannot obtain it, we experience despair.”³³ Now the verbs “consider,” “decide,” “think” quite obviously are acts of the intellect or of reason. This is perhaps why his friend Jean-Pierre Camus remarked about the saint’s understanding of the passions: “I am familiar with the distinction between the reasonable and sensitive appetite. I was not aware of such a difference between the passions and the affections, as he said existed. In fact, I thought that when the passions were governed by reason they were called affections.”³⁴

Admittedly, the distinction the saint makes between a passion and an affection needs a thorough study. But for our purposes, we can show that passions or emotions in many instances are religious, cultural and social constructs, viz., emerging from our values and beliefs and revealing what we consider to be important, what really matters to us. This was seen in the saint’s strong reaction to the news of the irresponsible young man. As we know from his writings and his life, he greatly cherished and valued spiritual friendships and was deeply affected when one of his friends, like his closest friend, Antoine Favre, and his family were being disgraced. The role of reason or the mind in dealing with our passions and emotions is clearly set forth by Francis when he approvingly cites St. Augustine who says: “Christian doctrine subjects reason to God, so that he may guide and help it, all these passions [love, joy, fear and grief] to reason so that it may restrain and moderate them to the end that they may be turned to the service of justice and virtue.”³⁵ We see more clearly how our Christian beliefs and values are intended by the saint to shape our passions and emotions by his advice on how to deal with people who slander us: “His great advice when we are seriously calumniated was to look upon the Savior dying the infamous death on the cross between two thieves. ‘It is there,’ he said, ‘we find the serpent of brass and without venom and whose looks heal us from the bites and stings of calumny....Before this great example of suffering, we would be ashamed to complain and even more to have resentment against our calumniators.’”³⁶

This is a good example of how the saint believed that the mind or reason reflecting on the physical suffering and the calumnies of Jesus on the Cross can aid us in defining or restraining our natural impulse to anger and revenge, giving way to the practice of gentleness. However, the

³¹ “The movements of the intellectual or rational appetite, which is termed will, are no fewer in number than those of the [sentient] or sensual appetite.... The former are usually called affections and the latter passions,” in Ryan, 2006, 1:63).

³² See Matthew A. Elliott, *Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Kregel Publications, 2006), 18-48 and passim.

³³ Ryan, 2006, 2: 58.

³⁴ Kelley, 160.

³⁵ Ryan, 2006, 1: 61.

³⁶ Camus, 352.

“inspired common sense” as Salesian spirituality is so aptly described,³⁷ cautions us to look for some balance in this matter of being calumniated and seriously slandered. We don’t have to look far. He has an important caveat in the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, when he says: “Nevertheless, I except...certain crimes so horrid and infamous that no man should put up with being falsely charged with them if he can justly acquit himself of it. I also except certain persons on whose reputation the edification of many others depends.”³⁸ So someone, for example, unjustly accused of child sexual molestation would have every right to seek redress and have his or her name cleared rather than simply bearing with it patiently and gently.

Peacemaker Not Pacifist

The imposition with Papal approval of levying a tax on the impoverished clergy of Savoy by Charles-Emmanuel to finance his wars indicates that Francis saw the legitimacy of some wars. Of course, the clergy resisted because of their dire economic situation. To overcome this resistance, the saint reasoned in the following way: “Would it not be shameful for the priests to leave all the burden of the war to the people? Indeed the ecclesiastical legislation had foreseen the case that exemption should not operate in case of some great public necessity (XVII, 300). ‘It is only right,’ he concluded, that we should contribute out of our goods and our prayers to defend our churches, our lives, and our priests while the population are generous with their goods and the nobility with their blood.”³⁹

This statement of giving financial support by way of taxes reveals that the saint saw the necessity for a just war, however, disinclined he was to resort to violence. The overemphasis on his conception of the virtue of gentleness may easily lead some to conclude that, understood in a wider context, his teachings on gentleness would be the basis for a Salesian pacifism. This is apparently the way one author reads the chapter on gentleness in the *Introduction to a Devout Life*: “A contemporary spirituality in the Salesian mode would emphasize the positive sense implicit in Francis’ teaching on gentleness. Such a reading would see in this chapter the challenge to an active involvement and commitment to peace, a call to oppose war and militarism and the use of violence in any form against our fellow human beings.”⁴⁰ This reading does not readily explain Francis’s position in the matter above nor in the case of how to deal with the right of the Catholics in Geneva to practice their faith.⁴¹ So the saint is more accurately characterized as a peacemaker rather than a pacifist, an important distinction for the major thrust of this study.

³⁷ Elizabeth Stopp coined this phrase in her introduction to Francis’ letters, pp. 33-34. See *St. Francis de Sales: Selected Letters* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960).

³⁸ Ryan, 1972, Part 3, chap. 7.

³⁹ Lajeunie, 2:151, citing Camus.

⁴⁰ Anthony Ceresko, OSFS, “A Hermeneutical Strategy for a Liberationist Interpretation of St. Francis de Sales,” <http://www.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/Ceresko-Liberationist.pdf>, page 7.

⁴¹ “Francis de Sales came to abandon the hope that Geneva could be brought by diplomatic pressure alone to admit freedom of conscience for Catholics. On four occasions between 1604 and 1620, he recommended to the duke or his officials men who had come to him with plans concerning Geneva. At least three of the schemes seem to have been military, although apparently they found no favor at court,” in Ruth Kleinman, “The Ecumenism of St. Francis de Sales,” <http://www.desales.edu/assets/salesian/library/Kleinman-Ecumenism.pdf>.

Personal Insults and Social Injustices

On looking more closely at the saint's advice regarding gentleness and remedies for anger as well as gentleness toward oneself, he seems to be emphasizing the containment of anger when it is a matter of personal injuries or insults. This is implied when the saint says: "If we are puffed up and enraged when we are stung by detractors and enemies, it is a sure sign that neither humility nor [gentleness] is genuine and sincere but only apparent and artificial."⁴² Furthermore, the categorical statement Francis makes about not giving way to anger appears to allow for some exceptions when he states: "I state absolutely and make no exceptions, do not be angry at all if that is possible. Do not accept any pretexts whatever for opening your heart's door to anger....It is nourished by a thousand false pretexts; there never was an angry man who thought his anger unjust."⁴³ The phrase "if that is possible" seems to leave the door open to justified or legitimate anger.

The well-known expression, as noted above – "The more I think about it, the madder I get" – shows how anger can be enflamed "by a thousand pretexts," especially when it is a matter of a personal affront or insult. Our pride and self-love keep turning the real or imagined injury over and over in our minds so that our prejudices, beliefs and values help to define it since anger is a complex emotion and hence a social, spiritual and cultural construct. For example, if certain courtesies or practices in a given culture are not observed, we may readily, whether intentionally or inadvertently, offend others and give them the occasion to vent their anger. Our emotions are generally closely tied to our reason and reveal what we believe in and truly value, and most frequently it is the unrealistic and inflated image we have of ourselves.

We know that Francis was very wary about the explosive combination of anger and zeal. "There are persons who believe that no one can have great zeal without great anger, thinking they can accomplish nothing unless they spoil everything. On the contrary, true zeal rarely makes use of anger. Just as we do not apply the knife and flame to sick men unless they cannot be helped otherwise, so too holy zeal does not employ anger except in extreme necessity."⁴⁴ But here again, he leaves the door open to some occasions where wrath can be the only method for achieving good. So he sets forth the criterion: "For St. John and St. James, who would have imitated Phinees and Elias in making fire descend from heaven upon men, were [reprimanded] by our Lord [Lk 9:54] who gave them to [understand] that his spirit and zeal were [gentle], mild and gracious, making use of indignation or wrath but very rarely, when there was no longer hope of doing good any other way."⁴⁵

So Francis admits the use of wrath (anger) on rare occasions "when there was no longer hope of doing good any other way."⁴⁶ Notice, the purpose is not of seeking revenge or self-satisfaction but of doing good, accomplishing something positive and worthwhile. Of course, this is always a judgment call, relying on the practical reason. The criterion in this case is clearly set

⁴² Ryan, 1972, Part 3, chap. 8.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ryan, 2006, 2: 185.

⁴⁵ St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. Don Mackey (Rockford, IL.: Tan Books, 1997), 456-57.

⁴⁶ Dom Mackey's translation of the phrase: "lhors qu'il n'y avoit plus esperance de pouvoir profiter autrement" (OEA, 4: 235) better conveys the meaning of the original than Ryan's.

forth by the saint earlier in this chapter when he quotes approvingly St. Dionysius: “The man who would correct others [or for that matter right serious injustices] must first take care that anger does not deprive reason of that [authority] and domination over the soul which God has given to it, and that anger does not stir up rebellion, sedition, and confusion within ourselves”⁴⁷ In correcting others, the saint realizes that there is always the danger of becoming angry. However, we have to make sure that this anger is a just anger and does not create chaos within us so that we exceed the bounds of reason. As he notes: “It is not in everyman’s power to know how to be angry when he ought and as he ought.”⁴⁸ Although it might not be in every man’s power to properly regulate this explosive passion, it follows that some are capable of being angry when they “ought and as [they] ought.”

Let us examine more closely Francis’s words about resorting to anger in the service of zeal: “When those great servants of God [Phineas, Moses, Elias] made use of wrath it was on occasions so solemn and for crimes so excessive that there was no danger that the punishment would exceed the fault.”⁴⁹ The saint is obviously speaking here of actions of individuals that seriously offended God such as idolatry. However, could not the same principle be applied, without doing violence to his words, to egregiously unjust social structures? The emotion or passion of anger or indignation is what moves others to take action to overcome these unjust social structures such as abortion on demand, hating and eradicating the evil without hating the sinner or those who profit from such unjust social structures. The word indignation conveys the notion of an anger aroused by a manifest injustice, one that seriously undermines the inherent dignity of a human being. Unfortunately, this can be accompanied by scorn for the perpetrators. Admittedly, it is extremely difficult to separate the sinner from the sin. So he warns us: “Bitter, harsh, presumptuous, and insolent minds, serving their own inclinations, moods, dislikes, and arrogance, would cover their own injustice with a mantle of zeal. Under the name of that sacred fire, each man permits himself to be burned up by his own passions.... He talks of nothing but zeal, and we see no zeal, but only opprobrious speech, fits of anger, acts of hatred, envious deeds, and disturbances of mind and tongue.” The saint goes on to say, “it is not zeal that we look for but glory and the satisfaction of arrogance, anger, pique and other passions.”⁵⁰ Here, he clearly paints a very vivid picture of the zealot and zealotry.

In this same chapter, the saint sets forth the three occasions for exercising zeal in a just and reasonable manner to fight against evil or to avert it. The first one he notes is that preachers have the public duty along with superiors, magistrates and prelates “to correct, censure and reprimand others.” Obviously, in doing so, they have to attack the evil in a stern, firm and sometimes even harsh manner, while being careful to avoid indulging their pride and passions. The words “censure” and “reprimand” certainly convey this idea.⁵¹ Although, the saint was not speaking of structural social evils like abortion on demand, we can readily assume that he would apply this principle to such an evil and do so with great vehemence and conviction. If we follow the logic of his teaching, we can reasonably conclude that great social injustices call for on certain occasions strong, stern and even harsh rebuke and condemnation. In this regard, we are

⁴⁷ Ryan, 2006, 2: 186.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2: 187.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 187

⁵⁰ Ibid., 188.

⁵¹ Ryan, 2006, 2: 188.

reminded of how he castigated Aristotle and Seneca for their disregard of the sacredness of human life.⁵² He says of Aristotle: “Ah, for so great a philosopher to advise abortion! ‘To prevent a conceived man from being born is to outdo murder,’ says Tertullian.”⁵³ These are rather stern and forceful words from the gentle Doctor of Love. Seeing how passionately, sternly and firmly he rebukes these great thinkers of Classical antiquity, we can readily admit that he would decry from the pulpit the social evil of abortion on demand that has destroyed more lives than all the wars of human history with a zeal and a vehemence that would deeply move his listeners and sensitize them to this horrific evil and imbue other preachers with a similar zeal.

Conclusion

In tweaking the portrait of the gentle Francis de Sales, we have attempted to make more prominent certain stern and harsh lines that afford a more realistic view of the saint without distorting his image. He was by nature hot-blooded and irascible and had to struggle against a volatile temperament throughout his life. In this way, he achieved a remarkably high level of the virtue of gentleness that so marked his personality. Yet, there were occasions when he felt it necessary to resort to stern and harsh measures which were intended to achieve good results without exceeding the boundaries of reason and justice. It is true that on the rare occasions when he gave into anger, he was left with a feeling of discomfort. And yet, he tells us on one occasion he would have done the same thing over again in a similar situation. Fr. Louis Brisson, founder of the Oblates Sisters and the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales and a faithful interpreter of the saint’s spirituality, deeply appreciated Francis’ spirit of gentleness, but also realized its limitations. And so he counsels the Oblate sisters:

He particularly recommended charity and gentleness in daily contact with the young working women. Because of his long experience with sometimes difficult young women, he believed it opportune to be precise: “My daughters, when I strongly urge you to be gentle and cordial, I do not mean to say you should push this virtue to weakness. Oh no! But I insist that you be firm; otherwise, you will accomplish nothing. When you have to reprimand a child, if you employ only gentleness and do not remain firm, you will obtain nothing. There are some persons for whom gentleness is insufficient. But by speaking to a young girl gently and firmly you will win her over, if not the first time, the second time.”⁵⁴

The notion of gently but firmly calls to mind the motto “*suaviter et fortiter*”. Interestingly, one source translates this well-known Latin expression as follows: “*Suaviter* in modo, *fortiter* in re – Gentle in manner, resolute in deed.”⁵⁵ It conveys the idea of the iron hand in the velvet glove. However, in certain cases the “*fortiter* in re” was more readily felt than the “*suaviter* in modo.”

⁵² See Treatise Bk. 11, chap. 10.

⁵³ Ryan, 2006, 2: 225.

⁵⁴ Yves Beaudoin, OMI, *Father Louis Brisson (1814-1908): Documented Biography* (Philadelphia: St. Joseph’s University Press, 2008), 80.

⁵⁵ *Dictionary of Quotations from Ancient and Modern, English and Foreign Sources*, selected and compiled by Rev. James Wood (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1893), 405.

Gentleness has the strength of steel rather than of iron because it has more give, is less brittle, and can roll with punches. The strength or power of gentleness comes from its resilience and pliability. This is how Camus tells us that the saint expressed its power: “One of the great solemn maxims of our Blessed Father was: ‘Blessed are pliable hearts for they will never break.’”⁵⁶ However flexible and pliable the virtue of gentleness made the saint, we have seen that under certain circumstances he remained unbending and unyielding, certainly conveying sternness and firmness.

Despite the saint’s skittishness regarding the volatile combination of zeal and anger, he does allow for the possibility of this mixture when egregious evil is at stake and good cannot be accomplished by gentleness. It devolves especially upon those who have positions of authority and whose responsibility it is to teach or to preach to decry such evils with a measure of vehemence, indignation and even wrath that does not exceed the boundaries of reason. Expressing such strong emotions or passions on these rare occasions readily reveals the serious nature of the evil and can move the person and others to take adequate if difficult steps to eradicate or at least mitigate the evil. This must always be done with the cautionary advice he gives about not indulging our pride and passions. Not to do so on these occasions can be interpreted as condoning or being indifferent to the evil. This is perhaps where the saint’s sternness is most relevant for us today and can be helpful in navigating such perilous waters.

⁵⁶ Camus, 117. This expression can also be found in the saint’s writings but used in a different sense. See OEA, 6:17 and also *St. François de Sales Oeuvres*, préface et chronologie par André Ravier, avec la collaboration de Roger Devos (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969), 1009.