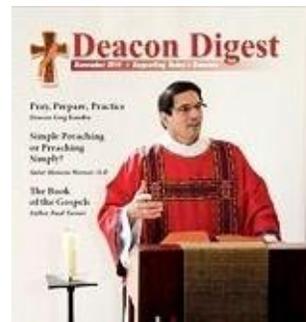


Salesian Spirituality: An “Every Day” Approach to Holiness

by THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S.



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“Inspired common sense” is how Elisabeth Stopp, a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, once characterized the broad appeal of St. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622). Known to have provided insightful guidance to a host of inquiring believers, he demonstrated a keen talent for writing about the spiritual life that remains readily available in his many works, most notably his best-selling *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

There the saintly bishop champions two then-revolutionary ideas. First, he posits that holiness is a vocation for all, not just clerics or religious. Second, he demonstrates how this “devout” life is not supplemental to, nor divorced from, the ways of the world; rather, it is to be lived in and through the particularities of one’s state-in-life. So, for example, a mother of seven children does not become holy by spending her time praying in church; rather, her path to heaven is trod through the myriad ups and downs of motherhood, in the virtuous care she provides to her family.

Salesian spirituality has thus been characterized as an “everyday holiness.” In addition to its “commonness,” in the sense of being able to be practiced by anyone, its chief feature is its “ordinariness,” in the sense of not requiring heroic feats of sanctity. Rather, Francis de Sales counsels the cultivation of “little virtues,” of which he writes in the *Introduction* (III:1):

Occasions do not often present themselves for the exercise of fortitude, magnanimity, and great generosity, but meekness, temperance, integrity, and humility are virtues that must mark all our actions in life. ... In practicing the virtues, we should prefer the one most conformable to our duties rather than the one more agreeable to our tastes. ... [Y]ou should choose the best virtues, not the most popular, the noblest, not the most obvious, those that are actually the best, not the most spectacular.

This “everyday” appeal of Salesian spirituality issues from ordinary events in Francis’ own life, which, being a saint, he dealt with in an extraordinary way. Like all of us, he had his troubles, particularly in matters of health. As a young student in Paris, he suffered through a clinical depression, after becoming convinced, based on the theological debate of the time, that he was pre-destined to spend eternity in hell. Only after a prayerful visit before the black Madonna was he released from this torment, and from then on his life and writings exuded a Providentially-based optimism. Later, while studying law in Padua, he became so physically ill as to be on death’s door. So, owing to his love of

learning and appreciation of the sciences, he willed that his body be donated to the medical school there.

Ordinary tasks also formed the apostolic context of his clerical life. As a priest, he engaged theologians and townsfolk alike in the neighboring Calvinist regions through artful dialogue concerning questions of belief; he even resorted to printing and distributing his thoughts on pamphlets when a town council outlawed his preaching. Then, as a bishop, he routinely dealt with everyday issues involving catechetical instruction (initiating what we now know as C.C.D.), pastoral guidance (writing more than 10,000 letters), and diocesan administration (including the reform of monasteries and visitation of parishes).

But beyond the saintly manner by which he responded to ordinary events, the legacy of St. Francis de Sales endures in the living witnesses of his spirituality, in particular the Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary. At the time, this order of nuns, which he founded together with ST. JANE DE CHANTAL, was uniquely conceived. It would admit to its cloister women who otherwise were not fit for the rigors of monastic life, including widows and the infirm. They would live a rule based not on ascetical austerity but on humble and gentle relationships, “hidden” from the world in prayer yet actively involved in charitable outreach to the needy in town. From this foundation have come dozens of religious congregations, secular institutes, and consecrated societies that embrace and perpetuate the Salesian charism.

This living charism embodies another sense of the “everyday holiness” that characterizes Salesian spirituality. Beyond a focus on doing the ordinary extraordinarily well, the Salesian spirit considers the pursuit of holiness an “every day” phenomenon; that is, Salesian spirituality is contained or contextualized in the period of just one day!

St. Francis de Sales expressed this originally in the *Spiritual Directory* he penned for the Visitation Sisters, yet it can readily be adapted and applied to the life of anyone in today’s world. His little guide-book contains prayerful approaches to life, beginning with the point at which one gets out of bed in the morning, spanning the common tasks one faces throughout the day (eating, working, relaxing), and concluding with the manner in which one goes to sleep at night.

For St. Francis de Sales, the “present moment” of the current day is the only time over which we have any control; by focusing our energies there, and only there, we are more likely to remain at peace, neither disturbed about the past nor anxious about the future. As he writes in another letter, “Let us be firmly resolved to serve God with our whole heart and life. Beyond that, let us have no care about tomorrow. Let us think only of living today well, and when tomorrow comes, it also will be today and we can think about it then.”

In this “every day” context, we grow in holiness to the extent that we become consciously aware and intentional about doing what we routinely do for the love of God. Upon arising, we can recall the Resurrection and greet God with gratitude for having another day at our disposal. We can then prayerfully prepare the day by considering what lies ahead and resolving to practice virtue and avoid vice in the situations that present themselves. We can take our meals in a spirit of thanksgiving for God’s bounty, approach our work as sharing in the Creator’s activity, and take our leisure as a God’s

welcome gift of peace. At the end of the day we can examine our consciences to acknowledge humbly both how we have grown and where we have failed, gently committing both into God’s merciful care. And when we retire at night, we can prayerfully envision that one day we will rest eternally with God.

But the key to it all, and the exercise which forms the nucleus of Salesian spirituality, is the “direction of intention.” As our patron explains it in 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 will 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.

They should not neglect this practice in matters which are small and seemingly insignificant, nor even if they are engaged in those things which are agreeable and in complete conformity with their own will and needs, such as drinking, eating, resting, recreating and similar actions. By following the advice of the Apostle, everything they do will be done in God’s name to please him alone.

This little exercise encapsulates several key aspects to Salesian spirituality. By pausing to say a brief prayer before our actions, even the routine ones, we offer them to God, thereby transforming what we do into something divine as well as human (an “incarnational” emphasis). By this offering, we practice conversion as we recall that whatever we do is to be God’s will, not our own (an “ascetical” dimension). And by imploring God’s help, we express confidence that divine grace is sufficient for all we do (a “sacramental” approach).

But best of all, this simple approach to “every day” life affords us serenity and enables us to overcome anxiety – which this Doctor of the Church calls the greatest evil that can happen to a soul, except sin. And here lies the anthropological genius of St. Francis de Sales. He recognizes that at the heart of human living is our intention or our willingness; as such, the outcomes of our efforts, along with the actions of others and the contingencies of life, are not something within our control. Yet these are most often the source of our discontent. But if we learn to direct our intention, in whatever we do, to the fulfillment of God’s will, then our actions can never fail, no matter what the results may be. If our aim is to please God, then we do! And every day we start all over again, knowing that we are one day closer to our eternal salvation.

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