



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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On Being Human: A Salesian View

For almost four hundred years, many people have been attracted to St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) because they see him as a very human saint, as one who has a deep and profound understanding of what it means to be human and how the human heart works. He exhibits this particularly in his two masterpieces of Western spiritual literature - *The [Introduction to a Devout Life](#)* and the *Treatise on the Love of God* - as well as in his sermons and voluminous correspondence. He says in one of his letters about grieving over the death of his sister, "After all, I am only human." His understanding of humanity has its roots deeply planted in Sacred Scripture; the writings of the Fathers of the Church; those of the Classical Antiquity, i.e., the ancient writers of Greece and Rome; and in his own personal experience as a renowned preacher and spiritual guide.

In view of this, our saint knows how to harmonize genuine human values with the values of the Gospel. For him the study of human nature is inseparable from the study of God. He emphasized over and over again that our true dignity rests on the fundamental truth that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. From this it follows that we can only become fully human in God. (Hugo Rahner)

As the image of God, we actively share in the creative power of God, who created the whole universe and drew us from the earth's slime in an ecstasy of benevolent love by the breath of his mouth. (cf. Gn. 2:7). So in the Salesian view, benevolent love is the greatest creative power. Man and woman are the image of God principally by their God-given power to love as God does. We must have the same attitude of benevolent love toward the universe that God has -- an attitude of "let it be", not in the sense of "let it alone", but in the sense of let it be what the Creator wants it to be. In this way, we become God's collaborators, co-creators with God in fashioning our future and the world's destiny, and we become attuned to modern ecological concerns.

Since we are made in the image of the trinitarian God, in whom the divine persons live with and for each other (Schillebeeckx), we must be very conscious of the ecclesial bond that links or

joins us to the community of believers and of our solidarity with the entire human race. If we are all made in the image and likeness of God, then we are all made in the image of one another, as St. Francis de Sales was fond of saying. For us Christians, in the words of Gabriel Marcel, "to be is to be with". Living a full human life means living it with and for others. This explains more fully why 'nothing human is foreign' to us because everything that is genuinely human strikes a responsive and resonant chord in the very center of our being. Admiration and appreciation for man's accomplishments in all realms -- art, literature, science, technology, human services, etc. - - are the natural result of this sense of solidarity with the human race. And so is the virtue of compassion and the necessity for forming lasting friendships.

In the Salesian view, we are not only in the image of God as regards our higher faculties -- the soul, intellect and will -- but also with regard our bodies. Listen to what St. Francis de Sales has to say about our bodies: "The Christian must love his body as the living image of that of our incarnate savior as coming from the same stock as his and hence belonging to him by parentage and consanguinity" (Treatise., 3:8; *Oeuvres* 4:193). This is why the central truth of Christian humanism, viz., that we are made in the image and likeness of God, is intended to engender a healthy self-image and self-respect.

In Salesian Christian humanism, "the first elements of the knowledge of God are in self-knowledge:(*Oeuvres*, vol. 7, 79-81). By revealing himself to us, God has revealed us to ourselves. (Cardinal Bérulle). The supreme goal for us is to achieve wisdom. Francis de Sales understands wisdom to be "knowledge whereby one savors, tests and penetrates the goodness of the law and the revealed things of the gospels, not in order to speak or preach about them, but to practice them" (*Oeuvres*, vol. 9, 33). "Know thyself" and "follow reason" or "follow nature" (two very well-known motto's of Classical Antiquity, when understood in the light of Christian faith, constitute for Francis the very essence of Christian wisdom.

By distinguishing three levels in the higher part of our being, de Sales' understanding of human nature can assist us in the process of self-knowledge and self-discovery, and hence in the discovery of God. (Cf. Treatise, 1, chp. 11 & 12) The first level, St. Francis de Sales tells us, reasons according to the data of human knowledge, the second according to divine revelation, but the third level does not reason at all. This level is variously called "the supreme point of the soul", "the Holy of Holies", the very center and core of our being -- the domain of intimacy with ourselves and with God. It is the area where the virtues of faith, hope and love dwell; where intuition, contemplation and aesthetic experience reside -- the level where we are most in touch with ourselves. When people penetrate to this innermost part of their being, they discover their true selves and become capable of integrating their existence -- of putting it all together. This core of our being is not a place of alienation and isolation. Far from isolating us from others and alienating us from ourselves, it makes us capable of uniting all levels of our being so that we can reach out in benevolent, ecstatic love to others and to the world around us.

To follow reason or nature, as understood by de Sales, leads us to the very core of our being, to the "Holy of Holies." But we can only pass over from one level to the next by the power of Christ's Passover, who entered the "Holy of Holies" by his agonizing suffering and death. This is the true liberation that we are called to seek. In this view, human nature is no longer simply a

limited essence. It becomes in de Lubac's term a *capax Dei* (a capacity for God), an openness to self-transcendence and to ecstasy.

By an attitude of benevolent love, we accept the world and all created things for the value they have in themselves apart from any utilitarian value they may have for us. In this way, we are responsive to modern ecological concerns and hold ourselves responsible for the use of this world's resources.

Benevolent love is also necessary for forming a truly critical and objective mind in the search for truth. A critical mind rests on the ability to carefully distinguish one thing from another, of not confusing them, and of giving each its proper value. It is benevolent love that makes us appreciate and carefully distinguish among created things. This love plays an indispensable role in developing a critical, objective and independent judgment. " It is love," de Sales declares, "that makes us judge," and he explains himself in this fashion: "Love as the weight and counterweight of the clock of our souls, makes us judge in favor of the good we like. If it is a love of charity; it makes us judge in favor of a true good. . . " (*Oeuvres*, vol. 26, 47). Nowhere is critical thinking more important than in our human relationships.

Salesian humanism sees a marvelous unity between God the Creator and God the Redeemer. Francis de Sales is in "admiration of the beauty of reason which God has given to man. . . " (*Oeuvres*, vol. 22, 35) and hence sees no contradiction between reason and faith because "they are affectionate daughters of the same father" (*Oeuvres*, I, 330-331).

To follow nature or reason then in the Salesian conception is to follow our capacity to love God and our neighbor -- to follow our capacity for personal transcendence and for an intimate life with God in Christ. "We can neither be true human beings without having the inclination to love God more than ourselves," our saint advises us, "nor true Christians without putting into effect this inclination."(*Treatise.*, 10:10 ; *Oeuvres* 5:203)

In summary, we see in the humanism of St. Francis de Sales a unique, conjunction interpenetration of intellectual and affective elements that encompass the totality of our being. He knows how to connect our head with our heart. The Salesian conception of the human person tries to harmonize and integrate the divine and human aspects. St. Francis de Sales' fascinating and engaging view of the human person lies at the basis of his teaching and spirit. "Man [humankind]," he states, "is the perfection of the universe; the mind is the perfection of man. Love is the perfection of the mind, and charity [i.e. benevolent love] is the perfection of love."
