



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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### *The Salesian Mission of DeSales University*

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*lecture to the university's faculty*

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#### **Some Current Trends in Higher Education**

I would like to set this talk on the Salesian mission of DeSales University against the background of some important trends that are occurring in higher education and, in particular, in those institutions which are considered to be the trend-setters.

In an article "One University, Under God?," Stanley Fish, the sometime deconstructionist and Dean *emeritus* of the Liberal Arts College of the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois, notes the eagerness of many students to flock to religion courses in secular universities. The whole tone of this article seems to reveal surprise or even disappointment with this phenomenon. They are enrolling in these courses, he tells us, not merely to gain an intellectual knowledge of religion but, of all things, to take religion seriously by finding meaning, guidance and inspiration for their lives. He appears to view this as a foreboding challenge to these institutions since it will abolish the former "assumed distinctions" – "reason as opposed to faith, evidence as opposed to revelation, inquiry as opposed to obedience, truth as opposed to belief."<sup>11</sup> Notice the false dichotomies under which this one time academic idol states that our prestigious institutions have functioned or malfunctioned, depending on your point of view.

Another academician, Stanley Katz, director of Princeton University's Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies and president emeritus of the American Council of Learned Societies,

believes that liberal education is in ruins in the research universities and the wannabees. The primary reason for this, in his view, is their emphasis on "the production of scientific knowledge over the transmission of culture."<sup>[2]</sup> This calls to mind Albert Einstein's pithy and pointed expression: "Not everything that can be counted counts. Not everything that counts can be counted." In Katz' view, liberal education can only be revived by changing the structure of these institutions and by instilling values into the core curriculum. He is not very sanguine that either of these will occur.

In a very perceptive and far-reaching article entitled "Psychology in Recovery," Paul Vitz, senior scholar and emeritus professor of psychology at NYU, describes how the field of therapeutic psychology is being transformed by what is being called positive psychology to give better balance to the negative psychology strongly influenced by Freud that stresses psychopathologies. "Positive psychology," he writes, "emphasizes traits that promote happiness and well-being, as well as character strengths such as optimism, kindness, resilience, persistence, and gratitude. These positive characteristics, sometimes called 'character strengths' or even 'ego strengths' by psychologists, will be recognized by members of all major religions and by most philosophers as names for what used to be called 'the virtues'."<sup>[3]</sup> So emphasis on character education is the new thrust in psychology. He states that many practitioners of psychotherapy admit "that although psychotherapy is helpful, it rarely provides life-transforming insight or happiness. As a result many psychologists themselves moved off into spirituality and religious experience as a more successful form of healing (Abraham Maslow was an early example)" (Vitz 20).

Paul Vitz views this movement toward positive psychology as very healthy since the negative psychology has had an enormous influence on how we think about ourselves and was largely responsible for creating the victim mentality. (See Vitz 19).

How we think about ourselves is fundamental to shaping our educational mission and philosophy. A sound mission and philosophy of education must be based on a clear conception of what it means to be human because we are not educating dogs or cats, however lovable they may be, but human beings. And a mission-driven institution like a person with a mission knows where it has been, where it currently stands and where it wants to be. It has a vision and a goal that it constantly strives to attain and works diligently to devise strategies and utilize resources most apt to achieve its goal.

In the College's first catalog, there was no specific mission statement. But there was one on the philosophy of the College. One section of this philosophy read as follows:

Over and above these specifically scholastic objectives, the College strives to implement the ideal of Catholic education. It recognizes that society can greatly benefit by the influence of cultured men who are committed to a Christian understanding of existence at all levels. These men are distinctive, not only because they reverence a distinctive body of revealed teachings, but are in addition committed to the proposition that there is a Christian way of being a man, and that this is the best way. (p. 8)

When Allentown College became co-ed in 1970, the expression was changed to read: "there is a Christian way of being human, and that this is the best way." It has morphed into, "DeSales University strives to teach the student what it means to be Christian in a Salesian way." This somewhat attenuated statement still expresses a preference for the Salesian Christian view of humanity. And it is this view of what it means to be human that I would like to dwell on since it is the basis of our educational philosophy as I understand it.

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## A Salesian View of What It Means to be Human

Over a four hundred year period, 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*<sup>[4]</sup> and the *Treatise on the Love of God*<sup>[5]</sup> - as well as in his sermons and voluminous correspondence. He says in one of his letters about grieving over the death of his sister, "Alas, I am only human."<sup>[6]</sup> His understanding of humanity has its roots deeply implanted in Sacred Scripture; the writings of the Fathers of the Church, which he calls the "Gospel explained";<sup>[7]</sup> those of 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, de Sales knows how to harmonize genuine human values with the values of the Gospel. He certainly would not subscribe to the contradictions that Stanley Fish states are now being challenged in academe by religion. For him the study of human nature is inseparable from the study of God. In other words anthropology is inseparable from theology. 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. Both male and female share equally in this dignity -- a belief, which during his day, was not generally accepted. From this it follows that we can only become fully human in God.<sup>[8]</sup>

As an aside, this fundamental Christian belief, viz., that God made human beings as male and female, doesn't sit well with those who believe that gender is a social construct. As one writer reports: "According to the FT [*Financial Times*] many schools now eschew the old 'binary way' of looking at sex and make do with the catch-all 'gender,' a much more plastic term: 'M,' 'F,' 'Neither,' 'Both,' 'Trans' (the preferred shorthand)."<sup>[9]</sup> This distorted approach to human nature can cause a good deal of muddied and muddled thinking about education.

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. (see 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 responsive to modern ecological concerns.

Of course, many resist this vision of humanity, viz., of being what the Creator wants us to be. This is reflected in a prayer a little boy made one day: "'Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time like I am."

Since we are made in the image of the Trinitarian God, in whom the three divine persons live with and for each other<sup>[10]</sup> 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 Christians, in the words of Gabriel Marcel, "to be is to be with."<sup>[11]</sup> 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, music, 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.

I would like to say a brief word about compassion. Francis de Sales explains compassion in this way: "We do not desire compassion because of the pain it brings our hearts, but rather because such pain unites us and associates us with our beloved who is in pain."<sup>[12]</sup> Therein lies the power of compassion; it is the power "to be with." De Sales stresses the unifying and transforming power of the love of compassion and makes us better understand its nature. Compassion makes us reach out in love so that we readily identify with those who suffer, and we become like them. It makes us experience what they are experiencing but not merely for the sake of the experience or the pain, but so that we will be moved to alleviate their suffering and pain or at least to help them bear with it and make some sense out of it.

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 to our bodies. Listen to what St. Francis de Sales has to say about our bodies: "A Christian must love his body as the living image of his incarnate Savior as issued with him from the same stock, and consequently belonging to him by parentage and blood."<sup>[13]</sup> This 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. It can be a strong antidote for anorexia and bulimia and the way that many people erroneously view the great gift of human sexuality.

By distinguishing three levels of consciousness 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. 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.<sup>[14]</sup> When persons 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, compassionate love to others and to the world around us.

To follow reason or nature, a motto dear to the Ancients, leads us to the very core of our being, to the "Holy of Holies." However, 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, the nature of man is no longer simply a limited essence. It becomes a "*capax Dei*" (a capacity for God),<sup>[15]</sup> an openness to self-transcendence and to ecstasy. This is perhaps why so many students are hungering for religion -- to satisfy a basic human need, a need which apparently escapes the ken of Stanley Fish.

To follow nature and reason 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," de Sales advises us, "nor true Christians without putting into effect this inclination."<sup>[16]</sup> However, in order to be loving, we must be free. True love can only be freely given and freely reciprocated. There are some academicians who believe that human freedom is an illusion and view it as "a relic of the religious past."<sup>[17]</sup> I wonder how they would respond to a student who has plagiarized a paper and in his defense says, "I was driven to do it," or "I couldn't help myself."

Let's get back to love. 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 much attuned to environmental 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.<sup>[18]</sup> 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 love of charity; it makes us judge in favor of a true good. . . ."<sup>[19]</sup>

Salesian Christian 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. . . ."<sup>[20]</sup> and hence he sees no contradiction between reason and faith because "they are affectionate daughters of the same father." With admirable clarity, he adds, "Both on the natural and supernatural level, reason is always reason and truth, truth. Just as our eyes receive light to see various objects, so our understanding is given the light of reason and the light of faith to arrive at truth which is indivisible. There are only different lights that show it to our understanding."<sup>[21]</sup> Note this important tendency of the saint to harmonize things that many people tend to separate and divide.

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."<sup>[22]</sup> This saying encapsulates Salesian Christian humanism and the mission of DeSales University.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Stanley Fish, "One University, Under God?", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. (Jan. 7 2005), C4.

<sup>[2]</sup> Stanley Katz, "Liberal Education on the Ropes," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (April 1,2005), B6-9.

<sup>[3]</sup> Paul Vitz, "Psychology in Recovery," *First Things*, (March 2005): 19

<sup>[4]</sup> Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, trans. and ed. J.K.Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1989). An online edition can be found at: <http://www4.desales.edu/~salesian/resources.html>.

<sup>[5]</sup> Francis de Sales, *Treatise On the Love of God*, trans. John K. Ryan, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963). Dom Mackey's translation can be viewed online at: <http://www.ccel.org/d/desales/love/htm/TOC.htm>.

<sup>[6]</sup> "Helas, je suis tant homme que rien plus." François de Sales, *Oeuvres de saint François de Sales, eveque et Prince de Geneve et Docteur de l'Eglise, edition complete*, 26 vols. (Annecy: J. Nierat, 1892-1932), 13, 54. This work will be cited as OEA in future references. All English translations are the author's unless otherwise noted. For a good English translation of this letter to Madame de Chantal, see *St. Francis de Sales: Selected Letters*, trans. by Elizabeth Stopp (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 140-144.

<sup>[7]</sup> OEA, 12, 305.

<sup>[8]</sup> See Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mysteries*, p xx. "Man only becomes human in God." For a treatment of the anthropology of St. Francis de Sales, see Alexander Pocetto, "An Introduction to Salesian Anthropology," *Salesian Studies* (Summer 1969). This can be viewed online. [http://www4.desales.edu/~salesian/resources/articles/english/anthro\\_1.html](http://www4.desales.edu/~salesian/resources/articles/english/anthro_1.html).

<sup>[9]</sup> Roger Kimball, "Retaking the University, a Battle Plan," *New Criterion*, 11 May 2005 <http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/23/may05/universe.htm>.

<sup>[10]</sup> See E. Schillebeeckx, "Foi Chretien et attente terrestre" in *L'Eglise dans le Monde de ce temps* (s.l.:Mame, 1967).

<sup>[11]</sup> See Gabriel Marcel, *Homo viator; Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row,1962).

<sup>[12]</sup> *Treatise*, Ryan, I, 250.

<sup>[13]</sup> *Treatise*, Ryan, I, 183.

<sup>[14]</sup> See *Treatise*, Bk. 1, ch. 12.

<sup>[15]</sup> Here is the way St. Augustine expresses this idea: "Eo mens est imago Dei, quo capax Dei est et particeps esse potest." *De Trinitate* XIV:11. See also Henri du Lubac, *Le mystere du surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1965), 141ff.

<sup>[16]</sup> OEA, 5, 203.

<sup>[17]</sup> See Gary Saul Morson, *Sideshadows: The Determination of Free Will*.

<sup>[18]</sup> See Alexander Pocetto, "Love and Critical Thinking in the Writings of Francis de Sales," *Proceedings of the PMR (Patristics, Medieval and Renaissance) Conference*, 14, (1989). Online: <http://www4.desales.edu/SCFC/Studies/ATP-CritThink.htm>.

<sup>[19]</sup> OEA, 26, 47.

<sup>[20]</sup> OEA, 22, 35.

<sup>[21]</sup> See OEA, I, 330-331.

<sup>[22]</sup> OEA, 4, 165.

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