



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Community, Communication, and Ecstasy

The initial contact that we make with others is generally difficult. This is noticeable not only when we are introduced to other people, but especially in the family or in community in the morning at breakfast. Sleep aside, some come easily out of their shells or cocoons, while others, who have a tendency to be too wrapped up and concerned about themselves, find it painful to go out of themselves. They remain aloof and incommunicative. They're generally "out of it," and it is difficult to bring them "back into it."

This rather common daily experience illustrates the problem of bringing people together to share a common life. It is possible only if there is communication, for without communication there can be no real Christian community. Christianity is founded and can only continue by and through communication since it is rooted in the communion of persons in the Blessed Trinity. Francis de Sales views the life of the Trinity essentially as communication:

[God] saw that among all the different ways of communicating himself there was none so excellent as that of joining himself to a created nature in such wise that the creature would be engrafted and implanted in the godhead so as to become with it one single person. Since of itself and in itself his infinite goodness tends to communicate itself to others, he resolved and determined to effect a communication of this kind. From all eternity there is in God an essential communication by which the Father, in producing the Son, communicates his entire infinite and indivisible divinity to the Son. The Father and the Son together, in producing the Holy Spirit, communicate in like manner their own proper unique divinity to him. So also this sovereign [gentleness] was communicated so perfectly outside itself to a creature that the created nature and

the godhead each retained its own properties while still being united together in such wise that they were only one self-same person.[1]

It is the nature of the Christian God to communicate himself, and his most perfect communication is the Word of God made flesh in the mystery of the Incarnation. In St. Luke's Gospel, we see how this mystery was communicated to the Blessed Virgin. It is important to point out that after having received the Word made flesh, Mary felt compelled to go out of herself and to communicate this Word to her relative Elizabeth. This sheds some light on why St. Francis de Sales gave to his Congregation of the Oblates as patron Our Lady of the Visitation. For him the mystery of the Visitation was essentially a mystery of communication. In Article 1 of the original Constitutions of the Congregation of the Visitation of Holy Mary, "On the End for Which the Congregation Was Established," the saint wrote:

Now this Congregation having two principal exercises: one, contemplation and prayers, the other the service of the poor and sick, principally of the same sex; it has fittingly chosen for patron Our Lady of The Visitation since in this mystery the very glorious Virgin performed this solemn act of charity toward the neighbor by going to visit and serve St. Elizabeth in her pregnancy and composed, nonetheless, the *Magnificat*, the sweetest, the most elevating, spiritual and contemplative canticle that was ever written.[2]

Mary communicated herself, and in doing this, she communicated Christ at the same time. This mystery was evidently the expression of the true nature, the special charism of the Visitation because, although Francis gave in to Cardinal Marquemont on changing the institute of the Visitation from a Congregation to a religious order with solemn vows, the saint insisted on retaining the name of the Visitation, while the Cardinal wanted place it under the patronage of the Presentation of Our Lady.[3]

The mystery of the Incarnation as a mystery of communication plays an important role in Salesian thought. The question of the motive of the Incarnation was frequently discussed not only during the Middle Ages, but also during de Sales' time. Our saint, without denying the Thomistic opinion, preferred the Scotistic or Franciscan view, viz., that the Word would have been incarnated even if man had not sinned. He finds this more in keeping with Sacred Scripture and even with the nature of the Trinitarian life of God. This life is based on love and hence on an eternal communion and communication between the three persons. They communicate all their perfection and all their goodness and give themselves completely and eternally to each other. It is this ecstatic life lived "with and for others" (Schillebeeckx) that makes de Sales grasp the motive of the Incarnation. To underscore the desire that Jesus had to unite himself to humanity, he speaks of the Incarnation as the effect of an ecstasy of love: "When he wanted to communicate himself to man, he was like one in a rapture, in an ecstasy by

[1] Francis de Sales, *Treatise On the Love of God*, trans. with intro. and notes by J.K. Ryan (Rockford, IL., Tan, 1975) 2 vols., I, 111.

[2] *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales, Edition Complète* (Annecy: Monastère de la Visitation, 1892-1964), XII, 352-370. Hereinafter designated as OEA.

[3] See OEA, 25:328, 340.

which he went out of himself to communicate himself to his creature." [4] It is this act of ecstasy that enlightens him about the nature of love as essentially a communication of oneself to others, a going out of oneself in order to serve others.

He wanted to draw from the mystery of the Incarnation the fullest implications of this communication and what it must mean for us as human beings. And so he asks rhetorically: "Why do we have the Incarnation? To teach us no longer to live like animals but with and according to reason." [5] To live according to reason in Salesian thought means to live according to the resurrected life of Christ and hence to live a life of love.

The Incarnation as an ecstatic communication of God's goodness gives us a deeper understanding of his notion of love with relation to community. According to de Sales, love does not reside, as St. Thomas believed, in complacency or delight alone. For our saint, love is essentially dynamic and ecstatic: "The true essence of love consists in the movement and pouring out of the heart [or the will], which immediately follows complacency and ending in union." [6] It is the passionate aspect of love that he insists on. So he affirms: "Love is a true passion of the soul, and hence it cannot be simple complacency, but must be the movement that proceeds from it." [7] If we compare these texts with the following one, the ecstatic character of Salesian love will become all the more apparent. "The soul of the lover flowed out on the side where the voice of her beloved was heard, going out of herself and beyond the limits of her own natural being so as to follow him who spoke to her." [8]

Self-transcendence is accomplished by the ecstasy of love. The human person achieves self-realization in and by the ecstatic, elevating and transforming nature of benevolent love. In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, de Sales distinguishes three kinds of ecstasy – sensual, intellectual and that of work and life. Strangely enough, the last one – the ecstasy of work and life is the most important because it necessarily involves communicating oneself to other human beings. "The ecstasy that is all-holy, all-worthy of love and that crowns the other two is the ecstasy of work and life." To live a life that goes beyond man's natural powers is to live ecstatically: "This is not to live in ourselves, but out of ourselves and above ourselves. Since no man can in this way go above himself unless the eternal Father draws him, it follows that such a life is a continual rapture and perpetual ecstasy of action and operation." [9]

It is this kind of ecstasy that is necessary to establish contact with others and is the basis of community because it involves a continual communication of oneself. It does not limit itself to creating community merely in one's own religious group but reaches beyond the confines of one's own community. It is this ecstasy that will enable religious communities to overcome the danger of turning in on themselves. One writer warns of this danger:

[4] OEA, 10:166.

[5] OEA, 9:456.

[6] OEA, 4:42ff.

[7] *Treatise*, Ryan, 1, 69.

[8] *Treatise*, Ryan, I, 301

[9] Ryan, 2, 30.9 [10] Eugene Kennedy, *Fashion Me a People: Man, Woman and the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967) 130, 133.

In a world waiting for those who can help it to learn the lesson of love and trust that will give it some chance of becoming a community, too many religious groups are concentrating on creating community only for themselves. The notion of community cannot stop short before the world of men. This is masturbation, not fruitful intercourse with mankind.[10]

Furthermore, the notion of ecstatic love gives us the basis for a deeper understanding of how obedience in Salesian thought, as a mystery of communion can help build community. This ecstasy of love is brought about when we are drawn out of ourselves by the Word of the beloved, of our Savior. It is this kind of love that holds the key to Salesian obedience. "Here is the general rule," the saint writes, "of our obedience written in capital letters: LOVE AND NOT FORCE SHOULD INSPIRE ALL YOU DO; LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE." This attitude engenders a "spirit of liberty, not the kind which excludes obedience but the kind that excludes constraint and scruples or over-eagerness." He tells us, for example, that the detachment which makes us leave our exercises of piety for reasons of fraternal charity is a "type of obedience." [11]

This notion of obedience has its roots in the Bible and the biblical conception of man. Man is created by God's word and by his will. It is God's word which gives him existence and defines the limits of this existence. One exegete highlights this truth: "To the breath by which man is constituted in his being God joins his Word. This first word takes the form of a prohibition. (Gen. 2:16). Throughout the course of his existence, he continues thus to be bound to his Creator by obedience to his will." Far from constraining him, this word of prohibition is necessary for his true development and for him to transcend himself. "This commandment appears to man as something forbidden, as a limit. In fact, it is necessary for his fulfillment. It permits man to understand that he is not God." [12]

The relationship between God and man is not static but dynamic; one where obedience is conceived as the "presence of the living God who dialogues with his creature." [13] In this view, the Christian is defined essentially as one who listens to the word of God. This is precisely the way our saint understands obedience: "For we are Christians, we say, and as such we listen to the divine word of God from the voice of man' [Thess. 2:13]." In a sense, revelation still continues because, "God customarily teaches us his will and makes us understand his word by means of men." [14] and "one hardly knows the divine good pleasure except through events." [15] Recourse to Sacred Scripture allows de Sales to give an uncommon extension to the idea of obedience. In a letter to St. Jane de Chantal, he distinguishes three degrees of obedience in relation to the persons whom we obey. The first degree is to obey our superiors. This is the commonly accepted meaning of obedience. The second degree is to obey our equals and our companions, and the last is to obey those below us. [16] The last two are called obedience in a

[11] *St. Francis de Sales: Selected Letters*, trans. with an intro. by Elizabeth Stopp (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 67.

[12] Xavier Léon-Dufour, "Homme," in *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, (Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1966) 442.

[13] *Vocab. Biblique*, 442.

[14] OEA, 9:357ff.

[15] OEA, 5:125.

[16] See OEA, 26:189.

broad sense, in the etymological sense of the Latin word – "*obaudire*" – to listen to. Here the saint assimilates obedience to charity because our equals and our inferiors have no other authority over us except the authority of love. They are the means by which God does not cease to talk to us. In the context of the "spirit of freedom" (*l'esprit de liberté*), he makes known this principle: "My principal consideration is to believe that God makes known his desires to me by that of my brothers, and, however, I obey God every time I give in to them." [17]

Now this is precisely how we create community – by listening to our brothers, to the members of our community, by having them communicate to us their thoughts, feelings, opinions and by communicating to them our views, wishes and ideas. This can only be done through frequent community gatherings. In its communal activities – the Liturgy, prayer, meals, etc., – the Lord is made present and dwells in their midst. In the Constitution of the Visitation on the house chapter, de Sales clearly brings this out: "And consider that in every assembly made in the name of God, he is in their midst, the sisters must assist [at the weekly chapter], which is truly made in this most holy name, with great reverence, devotion and attention, imagining that they see God our Lord." [18]

The saint has some remarkable words on the necessity of community for our salvation. In a sermon preached on the Sunday after Easter, the Gospel relates the incident of the upper room when Thomas is absent. Our saint exclaims:

"Oh how good it is," says the saintly prophet, "for brothers to live together" [Ps. 122:1]. Yes, certainly all the more when they support each other in doing good. One of the most necessary things for your salvation is to frequent the company of saintly people in this life, for, to tell the truth, we are, for the most part, like those we love and associate with.

Then he goes on to explain what happened to St. Thomas when he separated himself from the community:

Look, I beg you, at the poor St. Thomas today. He absented himself from the company of the Apostles. He left the community, and consequently, he thought he was lost if the goodness of his Master had not mercifully come to his aid. [He experienced] a very great incredulity, a great misfortune that befalls him because he had left the company of the Apostles and our Lady. This is what happens in the case of people who are too independent and do not want in any way another law than that which their own will dictates. [19]

It is especially here that de Sales expresses how much we are tied to one another in fulfilling our Christian and religious vocations. It is through community and in community that we will fulfill our destiny.

[17] OEA, 17:363.

[18] Const. XXVI, OEA, 25:85.

[19] OEA, 9:311.

We have already seen how Salesian thought can favor a rather new or fresh conception of obedience – as a mutual search for God's voice, God's will, through the Superior but also through the voice of the community in continual communication with each other. In some ways, the latter method is much more difficult than the former because it does demand a good deal of maturity and selflessness. It demands a continual ecstasy, a continual going-out of ourselves that can be crucifying simply in terms of time and energy consumed. And yet this is an essential way of building up a true and lasting Christian community.

In this communal search for God's will, how do we discern whether it is God's voice or merely the voice of men? This is particularly difficult when we are dealing with individual inspirations. De Sales warns us not to accept them blindly or uncritically but "only after having examined them or after having them examined." [20] It goes without saying that in order not to deceive ourselves or others, this type of obedience demands a great deal of prudence and critical judgment to determine whether it is really God who is inspiring us and who is talking to us through others and not our self-love or self-indulgence.

In this unusual conception and extension of the idea of obedience, personal responsibility is stressed and takes on dynamic dimensions. Obedience is not simply the fulfilling of an exterior law, but it is essentially the generous and continual response made to God's word who manifests himself and makes himself known through human beings and the events of our lives. Responsibility then is the response that we make to God's word. And it is only in the atmosphere of a spirit of freedom as espoused by Francis de Sales that this type of responsibility can be practiced, developed and deepened.

[20] OEA, 26:190.