St. Francis de Sales' Introduction to the Devout Life, 1609-2009

By Fr. Mark Plaushin

Still fresh, still timely four hundred years after its first publication, St. Francis de Sales' Introduction to the Devout Life is urgently worthy of the Church's attention and is a critical source for understanding “Salesian” spirituality as grounded in the universal call to holiness. It is an extraordinary work of modern pastoral literature, revealing the enriched perspective of a bishop-writer who sought to expand the human heart’s capacity for God.

In pastoral literature an author’s beliefs, values, anxieties and hopes are constitutive of the genre and go to the purpose of writing—to engender enthusiasm for the Gospel. At its best, such literature shapes the reader in his or her encounter with the text, and by extension, the proclamation of the Good News. Our Catholic tradition is wealthy with writers who have helped men and women more confidently appropriate the Gospel in their situation.

An intriguing component of this author-reader dynamic is the extent to which the author’s view of the human person resonates with what readers know to be true—even if they are uncomfortable hearing it. The reader is moved when the author shares something that resonates with her or his human experience. Which disciple is not encouraged, for example, by the Apostle Paul’s acknowledgement of a humbling “thorn in the flesh,” which despite fervent prayer went unrelieved (2 Cor. 12:7-9)?

This resonance is apparent in the Introduction and thus it has been a guide for spiritual growth for four centuries. De Sales wrote during a time when the Church was redefining itself consequent to shifting cultural paradigms. This it does in every age consequent to its interpretation of “the signs of the times” (Cf. Gaudium et
However, what we mean when we say the Church redefines itself is that Catholics, given their cultural context, seek to respond to the Gospel in an authentic way. Since the bishop shepherds the local Church within that context we may think of the episcopacy as called to amplify the Gospel in ways that support a response that is salvific (Cf. *Christus Dominus*, no. 12). It follows that it is an essential episcopal task to proclaim the Gospel in a way that helps us make sense of our world and to interpret the resulting tensions.

In considering this imperative we will first note that the *Introduction* grows out of an anthropology and episcopal method that affirms the universal call to holiness. We will see that the individual’s authentic response, “the devout life,” is our overarching vocation and foundation for any “particular” vocation and state-in-life. Lastly, we suggest that the *Devout Life* presses us to challenge our culture’s categorization of the human person.

**Affirming a kingdom for the ordinary**

I arrived at my post-novitiate internship animated; I was out of the novitiate, a professed religious, and even better, I was going to teach! John Beattie, my new superior, met me and my parents at the door of the Faculty House and helped me move in. After mom and dad left, I sat with John and received his terse welcome. He asked a surprising question: “Do you know why you are here?”

Oh wow! I thought he knew why I was there! I answered uncertainly, “I’m going to teach modern European history, Father.”

Anticipating this answer, and its inadequacy, he set it aside. “You are here to become holy,” he corrected.

“That too, no doubt,” I mumbled, or words to that effect. I thought I had covered holiness in the novitiate. Now, decades later I take his meaning. This focused, conscious and intentional focus on the larger sense of my vocation and John’s acceptance of my enthusiastic but naïve start-point is iconic of De Sales’ anthropology and episcopal method.

The *Introduction* is fruit of St. Francis’ direction of souls to holiness. It is the compilation of letters and notes used in the spiritual direction of a Madame Marie de Charmoisy. Through prodigious correspondence he directed many such people, who he called “Philotheas.” He explains, “I address my words to Philothea since I wish to direct what was first written for one person alone to the general benefit of many souls; hence I use a name that can refer to all who aspire to devotion. Philothea signifies a soul loving, or in love with God” (*Francis de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life*, [New York: 2nd ed., trans. and ed. John K. Ryan, Doubleday, 1989] p. 35).

St. Francis was encouraged to write the *Introduction* by a Jesuit friend, Père Jean Forier, with whom Madame de Charmoisy had shared Francis’ notes on spiritual direction and whose opinion Francis respected. “It is not my own choice or inclination that this *Introduction* is now made public,” he wrote; and of Forier’s specific role he continues, “His friendship had great influence on my will and his judgment great authority over my own” (p. 34). However, he anticipated criticism based on two misperceptions, one relating to his episcopal responsibilities and the other to an underdeveloped Christian anthropology marked by Reformation ambivalence toward the human person’s potential for holiness.

He felt that some would be skeptical of a bishop writing “popular” pastoral literature, for he writes, “I foresee that many people will say that it is only members of religious communities and persons dedicated to devotion who should give special direction in piety, that such things require more leisure than a bishop in charge of a diocese as large as mine can have, and that such an undertaking is too distracting for a mind that should be employed in matters of
importance” (p. 35).

However, John K. Ryan, De Sales’ twentieth-century translator and editor for the Introduction, comments, “The direction of souls was always a principal activity in the life of St. Francis de Sales as a priest and bishop” (p. 10). Francis himself notes, “For my own part, dear reader, together with the Seat St. Dionysius I tell you that it is primarily the duty of bishops to lead souls to perfection, since their order is as supreme among men as that of seraphim among angels” (p. 36). Francis saw spiritual direction as the expression of God’s loving heart: “Philotea, to have a guide as you travel on this holy road to devotion, you must most insistently beseech God to provide you with one after his own heart” (p. 46). This intimate proclamation of the Gospel is aimed at enlarging the capacity of the human heart for God. You will find little in De Sales that correlates to the commentary on cultural issues offered by today’s bishops. Rather, his episcopal style was to give focused, conscious and intentional attention to the way particular persons could be holy in particular situations and moments, and see the potential for these situations and moments to serve as opportunities for authentic Gospel response.

De Sales is optimistic about the ordinary person’s potential for holiness, knowing that people often see themselves as unworthy. A depleted sense of vocation—in the overarching sense of vocation which De Sales suggests—blinds many people to God’s presence as the offer of holiness, or wholeness, in the midst of “ordinariness.” It is the ordinary person St. Francis pursues and for whom he writes.

Almost all those who have hitherto written about devotion have been concerned with instructing persons wholly withdrawn from the world, or have at least taught a kind of devotion that leads to such complete retirement. My purpose is to instruct those who live in town, within families, or at court, and by their state in life are obliged to live an ordinary life as to outward appearances. Frequently, on the pretext of some supposed impossibility, they will not even think of undertaking the devout life. (p. 33)

So, is the Kingdom of God for the ordinary or the extraordinary, the holy or the unholy?
The Kingdom is certainly not an ordinary event, but it is for ordinary people who seek to be extraordinary, for the unholy who seek holiness. Even before the Council of Jerusalem, when discipleship was most narrowly argued as demanding circumcision and fellowship under the Mosaic Law, the hope that “all the ends of the earth will worship and turn to the Lord; All the families of nations will bow low before [the Lord]” (Ps. 22:28) was clear in Jewish thought. This set conditions for the more expansive notion of a universal call in light of Jesus’ mandate, replete in Matthew, to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19) and which, by dint of Paul and Barnabas’ hard-won defense of the Gentile mission, opened the
world to the Gospel's proclamation. Paul continued to emphasize the logic of God's reconciliation offered for all: "...God our savior, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth. For there is one God. There is one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:4-6).

The eschatological nature of this Kingdom points to the unfolding of God's plan of salvation in time and space. "I have other sheep," says Jesus, "that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16). However, when we confront our personal sinfulness our hope to be counted among the holy enjoys less optimism. With Peter, many are more comfortable saying, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8).

We are reluctant to self-describe as "holy," because maybe we unconsciously subscribe to the belief that becoming holy is something we painfully accomplish rather than something that Christ rejoices to accomplish in us. Thus, in the very Sacramental Encounter in which we echo the Centurion's, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed" (Matt. 8:8), we forget he does come under our roof! Thus, our sense of the sacramental as the refreshing self-communication of God's love for us in a vocation of holiness in Christ is diminished.

For St. Francis, while the call to holiness is universal, it is an intimate message from the heart of God to the heart of the human person. With our brothers in Emmaus we ask, "Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32) Regardless of our particular vocation or state in life, De Sales sees devotion as the heart's authentic response to God's presence—in a sense its heartfelt "super-vocation":

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My reader, my friend, it is my belief that it is God's will that I, a bishop, should paint on men's hearts not only the ordinary virtues but also God's dearest and most beloved devotion. I willingly undertake to do this both to obey him and to do my duty and also in the hope that by engraving devotion on the minds of others my own mind will be filled with a holy love for it (p. 37).

The devout life, the whole person

For Francis holiness—human "wholeness"—is the devout life, the "true" love of God. Francis' great respect for the individual comes from recognizing that each person is loved by God and is called into the overarching vocation of the love of God. Because the love of God is the love of those things God loves, it is the loving of others out of love for God. It is Francis' conscious, focused and intentional interest in the individual's potential to so love that finds exposition in the Introduction.

"When [the love of God] has reached a degree of perfection at which it not only makes us do good but also do this carefully, frequently and promptly, it is called devotion" (p. 37). Devotion, "arouses us to do quickly and lovingly as many good works as possible, both those commanded and those merely counseled or inspired" (p. 41). It calls us to attend to God's will found in Scripture, in our particular vocation and state in life, in those with whom we live, and as it comes in meditation. It is in this attentiveness that the love of God ignites in the heart a "flame that makes charity prompt, active and diligent" (p. 41). We call this virtue.

However, do not suppose that devotion is a thing done, or even a thing done very well. It is not so much the multiplication of virtuous acts; it is acute attentiveness to God's presence in the present moment and to the needfulness of others present with us in the present moment. If all are called to holiness, each is called to holiness. This idea of
the “specificity” of the love of God is noted in De Sales’ respect for the “strengths, activities and duties of each particular person” (p. 43).

The human person: Celebrated or categorized?

Individuals and institutions use categories to distribute resources effectively, to make important distinctions and to acknowledge nuance. Categorization is the use of language at the service of economy. Even God uses categories; in Matthew Jesus segregates goats from sheep—those who do the least for Jesus’ brothers and sisters and those who won’t (Matt. 25: 31-46). However, when categorization serves dehumanizing bureaucracies or malevolent ideologies it devalues what is most human in favor of economy. Jesus cautions against categories used by the Pharisees that minimize human potential. In Luke 5: 30: “The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’” Yet, Jesus assures them that it is for such categories of person that Jesus came: “I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.” There is then a tension in the use of category. Does category serve an appreciation of the human person and its needfulness, or does it minimize that which is human in favor of efficiency? Our Catholic tradition celebrates individuality toward communion and reminds us that category serves growth in the body of Christ, not profit; the economy of salvation, not economic efficiency; the demands of discipleship, not the imperatives termed absolute by the culture.

Against the backdrop of the Renaissance, which proved a catalyst for new and wonderful ways to think about the universe and the human person, De Sales’ witnessed the Reformation’s unyielding emphasis on categories that sparked religio-political warfare, undermined faith in the operation of the Holy Spirit within the Church, and set conditions for the Enlightenment’s rejection of the Christian instinct. These trends precipitated a nationalism that sought peace through absolutism and, in France, sought its blessing in Gallicanism (H. Daniel-Rops, *The Church of the Seventeenth Century* [London: J.M. Dent & Sons, LTD, 1963], pgs. 175-182). In such systems the categorization of the individual serves utility, compliance and individualism only as state-serving or self-completing—a mechanistic anthropology!

Eventually, “enlightened” anthropology yielded a Deism that eroded confidence in the idea of the individual as made authentic through the redeeming grace of a personal God in Christ, and the notion that this incarnate personal God invites men and women into virtuous collaboration. Radical skepticism found a God who sought relationship, who knows us by name and knows our unique needs and gifts, as unreasonable.

On the other hand, optimism about the human potential for cooperation with God toward redemption is conveyed in Francis’ anthropology. Today we call it Christian humanism, and it is De Sales’ most remarkable gift to the Church: “Devout humanism was essentially the doctrine of St. Francis de Sales” (Daniel-Rops, p. 55). It is the spiritualization of the Renaissance and it sustains an invigorating idea of the human person as “most beautiful because [he] had been sanctified” by God (Daniel-Rops, p. 55), someone to be celebrated, not to be channeled into categories of economic, political, social or even religious efficiency.

Salesian hopefulness in human potential is founded in a resolve to free men from dehumanizing categories. In writing about the Introduction, Pierre Janelle comments, “Liberty, moderation, reason: here is the true temper of the Christianized Renaissance, of that ‘devout humanism’ which was both the cause and the consequence of the Catholic Reformation” (Pierre Janelle, *The Catholic

The Church today faces the “usual” array of extraordinary challenges, signaled in two questions that serve any effort to address the “signs of the times.” First: “What is a human being?” The second is contingent: “How does the human person appropriate the Gospel in a way that is salvific given society’s tendency to value the person as either asset or liability?”

For Francis de Sales the human is that creature called to accept God’s love for him, and moved by it, he cannot help loving God and loving others out of love for God. In the Introduction humans are those whose hearts are made for this vocation of devotion. There is no category of human that is not called to this wholeness. “It is an error, or rather a heresy, to wish to banish the devout life from the regiment of soldiers, the mechanic’s shop, the court of princes, or the home of married people” (Introduction, p. 44).

If we are shaped in reading the Introduction we engage our culture and the world with enthusiasm for life in Christ, shaped by the heart of a bishop whose approach to episcopal ministry found expression in a personal and relevant exposition of the Gospel that makes sense in any century and for every person. The universal call to holiness signifies the unique dignity of each person in the life of Christ but also Christ’s work to affect wholeness in the world’s community of believers.

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