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The Introduction to Prayer Life according to St. Francis de Sales

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Christian perfection is a continuous gift of God; all of its achievements begin with his inspiration and are carried through by his help. At the same time, receiving this gift is a truly human act, the voluntary response of loving God with the whole heart and soul and strength. This mysterious joining of the divine and the human to make up the spiritual life is a display of that delicate divine condescension often extolled by St. John Chrysostom.

Underlying the human activity involved are the two divine channels of spiritual life, prayer and the sacraments. By giving man perfection through these means, God recognizes, ennobles and utilizes human freedom.¹ Vividly aware of this as a great spiritual director, St. Francis de Sales developed a dynamic program of prayer to insure the necessary response to God's gift of perfection. By this complete program he showed all who placed themselves under his direction, whether lay or religious, both what God expects of them and how they are able to respond to his love.

As to the nature and necessity of prayer, he sees these portrayed most vividly in the prayer of Jesus during his agony. "We must build all our prayers upon that of our Savior in the Garden of Olives, stripping ourselves of self and of all self-interest, resigning ourselves to the will of God."² On that occasion, after begging the heavenly Father to remove his cup of suffering, Jesus uttered the mysterious words, "Not my will but thine be done."³

How was it possible for Jesus, whose will was always perfectly one with that of his Father, to pray in that way? The answer lies not in any refusal to accept his God-given role. Rather, Jesus wanted to perform his redemptive mission as an act of pure love for and perfect obedience to his Father's will. It was as if he used this prayer to purify his affections before performing his great sacrificial action.

This motive is evident from the last words of Jesus to the crowds as recorded by his beloved apostle. "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say. Father, save me from this hour. No; this is why I came to this hour. Father, glorify thy name."⁴ St. Francis de Sales saw that in the Garden of Olives Jesus made to his heavenly Father the affective offering of his life before fulfilling that effective act of love which was his death. And this is how he conceived the role of prayer in Christian life.⁵

Prayer is affective love for God, generously and perseveringly cultivated until it produces that loving surrender and surrendering love that Jesus showed in his life and death. All its acts have no other goal than to achieve and keep alive the effective love for God and neighbor, which is the lesson of Christ's life. Prayer does this, the saint explains, "by placing our intellect in the divine light and clarity and by opening our will to the warmth of divine love."⁶ The gift of prayer is the "honey" by which God preserves the soul and all actions pleasing to himself, joyful and generous in heeding his secret inspirations.⁷

Achieving this attitude is both a gift and an intense human achievement because God condescends to allow men the privilege of sharing his perfection. Because he kept these two sides in mind, St. Francis de Sales did not limit prayer to acts of the moral virtue of religion, by which man renders God the honor due to him. For him it flowed more directly from the three theological virtues.⁸ He insists on prayer as mutual communication between God and man in the preface to the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which explains what the book seeks to accomplish. First, he wants to transform the vague desire for "la vie devote" into the solid determination necessary to advance in Christian perfection. Then he continues:

Once this is done, in order to help (my reader) advance, I show him two great means of uniting himself ever more intimately with the divine Majesty: frequenting the sacraments, through which our Lord comes to us; and prayer, by which he draws us to himself.⁹

In the imagery of the Canticle of Canticles, used often by this great director, Christians run toward God who is drawing them to himself by this gift.¹⁰ On man's part prayer is the "running," that is, the activity of steeping mind and especially heart in the divine will and providence in order to become as much like Christ as possible. It is the activity of centering the spirit and the whole personality upon God¹¹, to cement the spirit to God, as it were, and thus become a spiritual man, subject in all things to God's Holy

Spirit.¹²

God's part in prayer, the "drawing," which makes this human response possible, is his gift of raising man above natural inclinations to the sharing in his divine nature.¹³ The holy doctor insists that the strength of prayer lies here. "The union achieved depends completely on the divine activity without which (the soul) could not make the least effort to unite itself to God."¹⁴ This is what Jesus taught when he said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him."¹⁵ Although man must have a humble care to dispose himself for this divine gift¹⁶, he must remember that "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit."¹⁷

Such then are the principles. The great contribution of St. Francis de Sales to Christian spirituality in this area was the way that he translated these insights into a practical program of spiritual development. Originally he prepared this for lay people and made it available to the public in the second book of his *Introduction*. To religious he offers fundamentally the same program but goes into much greater detail to compensate for the necessary curtailment of human affections imposed by their state in life. This will be found in the *Treatise on the Love of God* which in the deepest sense in his introduction to the prayer life. The framework of this program, like the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, is made up of five parts, as follows.

PART ONE. The foundation of the program is the annual spiritual exercises which the saint calls not only a retreat but also a "flaying alive," because he compares the religious life with the holocausts offered to God in the Old Testament. In a spirit of total self-oblation religious "must renounce their inclinations, movements of nature, even the false liberty of their wills, to live in the future contrary to their inclinations and according to the perfection of the virtues."¹⁸

This exercise lays the foundations that enable a person ultimately to arrive at the final goal of the prayer life, that is, to utilize charity for purifying and ennobling all the virtues so that its fire will enflame all actions to glorify God.¹⁹ By this serious inquiry into the state of his soul and the motives of his activity each year, the Christian repairs any spiritual harm he may have suffered and prepares to devote himself to God's will with generous and undivided love during the coming year.

Ordinarily, it is true, St. Francis de Sales warns against making prayer simply an act of introspection or an examination of conscience²⁰, because "he who is lovingly attentive to please the heavenly Lover has neither heart nor leisure to turn toward himself." Yet he admits that Christians and especially religious must from time to time examine themselves more seriously "to cleanse, purify and adorn themselves as best they can, not to be perfect nor to satisfy themselves, nor from a desire for their progress in virtue, but to obey their Spouse because of the reverence that they bear for him."²¹

By this purifying of the motives of soul and practical resolutions this annual retreat renews spiritual insight and strength. The saint uses the figure of cleaning a clock. Each part of the personality is gone over, repaired, adjusted, oiled and replaced in first-class working order.²² In this way these annual exercises fortify the solid resolution never to break friendship with God, which is the essential condition for the spiritual life and which St. Francis de Sales showed his disciples how to form in the first book of his *Introduction*.

PART TWO. The cornerstone of prayer life is the conversation with God each morning and evening, and especially the morning mental prayer. This is made up of two parts: preparation for the day and meditation. The preparation for the day, a practice that the saint adopted while still a student at Padua, is made while washing and dressing. After foreseeing the difficulties of the day and preparing to meet them by specific, generous resolutions, the Christian makes an act of confident surrender into the hands of God's loving providence. In this way the preparation of the day is an affective offering of each day to God just as the Savior's prayer in the Garden of Olives was his affective offering of the passion to his Father.²³

By deepening a consciousness of personal insufficiency and constant need for God, this practical exercise of preparing the day serves as a perfect introduction for meditation, the hard core of the entire Salesian prayer program. Here is the most fully developed expression of prayer in the true sense, the intimate and mutual communication of man with God. This is where the theological virtues of faith and charity operate are operative.

When mental prayer is primarily an outpouring of living and loving faith, it is called meditation. This is an attentive concentration on God and spiritual subjects, deliberately and lovingly cultivated in order to induce in the will resolutions profitable for closer union with God.²⁴ Such communication is impossible without faith because it is essentially the spiritual pleasure derived from the insight that faith grants to those who are blessed with its insight into God's goodness.²⁵ This virtue makes a Christian want to please God by uniting with the Savior and all the saints in giving praise to God.²⁶

But since faith is an obscure knowledge, the prayer of faith is waged against human ignorance, weakness, resistance and self seeking. As a result, meditation is almost always difficult or, as St. Francis de Sales expresses it, "bittersweet."²⁷ During meditation the Christian fights a continual battle to hold back the wanderings of a fallen intellect and imagination and to urge his selfish will on to prefer God's glory to personal satisfaction. Loyalty in this battle over self on the affective level is the divine gift that communicates the generosity necessary to cooperate perseveringly with the outpourings of divine charity that produce an efficacious Christian life.

Where this divine charity reigns supreme and unchallenged, it effects that higher level

of mental prayer called contemplation, the simple, uninterrupted, loving concentration of the human spirit to divine things.²⁸ Such is the prayer of fervent Christians, those truly one in mind and heart with the Savior, those whose only real joy is in God's will. Whether this joy makes itself felt in a sensible way inside or outside of mental prayer depends not on their power but upon the divine good pleasure, and is not the essence of contemplation.²⁹ Even without any sensible awareness of God's divine life acting in the soul, this prayer of contemplation is free from the difficulties of meditation because it is the fruit of charity rather than of faith. It is already a reward. As the holy doctor stated, "Contemplation is looking at what we love to find pleasure in it."³⁰

These fruits may be reaped without knowing the names or divisions of the various types discussed in the seventh book of the *Treatise*. The saint did expect his disciples to study these chapters and told them that they contained all that was necessary to know about prayer, although he insisted that the "secret of secrets in prayer is to follow the attractions in simplicity of heart."³¹ He taught that even without the gift of continual or sensible contemplation, every fervent Christian should experience spiritual joy in prayer. Merely to converse "heart to heart" with one's God is a great good that of itself produces heavenly joy in any soul that loves him.³²

This practice of daily mental prayer corresponds in a sense to the purpose of the second book of the *Introduction* in that it is the chief means by which those living in Jesus Christ advance toward complete union with God; it is the "short cut to perfection."³³ The article in the Directory on prayer states its importance. "The serious practice of this exercise is one of the most important in the religious and spiritual life."³⁴ To do this the saint often insists on an attitude of loving response. In mental prayer the person must be "always peacefully near our Lord," that is, free from any worry or preoccupation or affection, because these prevent the soul from "receiving within itself the image of God."³⁵

Only persevering utilization of this gift of mental prayer supplies the courage needed in the daily efforts against discouragement and temptation, in the battle to bridge the gap between spiritual ideals and their imperfect fulfillment throughout life. Echoing the advice of her great director, St. Jane de Chantal said, "We must be constant in prayer and never give up, because in this game, he who quits loses. If you do not seem to be heard, cry out even louder."³⁶

PART THREE. The superstructure in this Salesian program is the prayer of the presence of God, formed by the practice of the direction of intention, frequent aspirations, momentary spiritual retirements, spiritual communions and thoughts about the approach of death. These are the building blocks of the heavenly mansion. They are the fuel of the fire of charity that keeps the holocaust of one's life continually burning before God. By means of this form of prayer is fulfilled "the counsel of the apostle that all we do may be done in the name of God and for his sole pleasure."³⁷

In emergencies and sickness these make up for the more elaborate schedule of prayer ordinarily followed, but which St. Francis de Sales said should not be attempted when the body was incapable of it.³⁸ Aspirations offer the best opportunity to practice the theological virtue of hope in prayer because they often take the form of short pleas based on a vivid confidence that God grants all men's needs in the way of reaching heaven through the merits of the saving death of Jesus. The saint warns, however, against multiplying petitions. Rather, he wants all needs for self and others to be included in the prayer for charity, which contains in itself the perfection of all the other virtues.³⁹ He recommends not spelling out petitions in detail but simply presenting them to God by a simple glance,⁴⁰ and never asking for anything only for self but including all who need the same virtues, in imitation of the form of the Lord's prayer.⁴¹

Like the third part of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, this prayer of the presence of God stimulates a love of perfect conformity to God's will, but on the affective level. St. Francis de Sales uses three figures to show this. First, by frequent aspirations the tree of life of the soul, that is, its resolution to do nothing against God and to seek him alone, is watered and kept fresh.⁴² Second, they are like breathing in God through, with and in Jesus Christ crucified.⁴³ And third, aspirations are arrows of love that generous Christians send continually toward the Sacred Heart.⁴⁴ Through them the person gains facility in keeping in the habitual presence of God, the goal of all prayer, for, as his most famous penitent said, "The essence of prayer is not in being always on our knees, but in keeping our will united to God's no matter what happens."⁴⁵

PART FOUR. The reinforcement of this program is a monthly renewal of affective love. In his very first letter of direction to St. Jane de Chantal he prescribed a special monthly examine for her⁴⁶, and in his original rule for the Visitation prescribed the renewal of the oblation that dedicated each of these to God under the protection of his Virgin Mother.⁴⁷ The saint provides flexibility in this point. Although he urges a special type of examination of conscience "every month or two" in the *Introduction*,⁴⁸ the Custom Book of the Visitation achieves this renewal by short retreats before great feasts, a practice not possible for those in the active life. In modern times the monthly day of recollection used by many priests and religious is a practical way to fulfill the point, which corresponds to the fourth part of the *Introduction*, namely, to uncover the ambushes of temptation and other enemies of spiritual progress, such as tepidity, discouragement and spiritual sloth.

PART FIVE. The final adornment of this program is that form of prayer which refreshes man spirituality by bringing even the faculties of the body under the influence of affective love. This is the use of all forms of public and external expression of praise and adoration of God, such as liturgical prayers and acts, hymns, litanies, processions and holy hours. Except where these are of obligation, St. Francis de Sales placed these in a subordinate role as compared to mental prayer.⁴⁹ The rule that he lays down is: make

use of vocal and public prayer according to the directives of the Church, personal need, attraction and convenience, in keeping with the duties of your state in life.

This principle grows out of the purpose of these kinds of prayer, which are to offer an opportunity for the joyful expression of affective love for God. Love cannot remain inactive. Vocal and public prayer help Christians fulfill their need to manifest this love. On certain occasions additional motives, like devotion to a saint, good example, brotherly love or attacks of sadness, indicate the use of vocal prayer.⁵⁰ Although it does not ordinarily achieve the intensity or intimacy of mental prayer, it can refresh the personality. In this sense St. Francis de Sales calls the office a "holy and divine recreation.."⁵¹ Neither this nor any other exterior form of prayer must become a burden because its great value is to refresh the spirit, just as the fifth part of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* offered a plan for the periodical renewal of the Christian life.

This then, in brief, is the extensive and intensive program of prayer that this great spiritual director developed. It is an active program, yet based completely upon the view of prayer as a gift of God, a gift that God wants to give to the soul more than any individual wants to receive it. God withholds the gift only when a Christian is not willing to make the effort to receive it.

How can a Christian prepare himself to receive this great gift of the divine condescension? She who learned this method best, St. Jane de Chantal, gave the answer in two short rules. "The one good preparation for praying well is to mortify ourselves well."⁵² Without true self-discipline a Christian cannot attain to that spirit of living faith, ardent charity and interior peace needed to foster this intimate conversation with God. And second, "We must forget ourselves and be lost in God...It is not enough to be little before him; we must be nothing."⁵³

St. Francis de Sales went to such pains to lay down this intense program of prayer because he appreciated that the continual cultivation of affective love is not only a good in itself as honoring God but is also an essential part of growth in fervor, purity of intention and indifference, those expressions of effective love which are the goal of the spiritual life.⁵⁴

In heaven the two will become only one act. This is why he could say, "All things were created for prayer. When God created angels and men, he created them so that they might praise, him forever in heaven."⁵⁵ Hence he closed one of his sermons on prayer by thanking God for this gift. "How happy are we to begin here below what we shall do forever in heaven! To it may God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit lead us. Amen."⁵⁶

NOTES

1. See Conference 18, On the Vows. OEUVRES DE SAINT FRANCOIS DE SALES, Annecy Edition, 6. 317.
2. Advice on prayer given to Sr. Marie -Adrienne Fichet of the Monastery of Annecy. OEUVRES 26. 315.
3. Lk 22. 42.
4. Jn 12. 27.
5. Collected Sermon 5 (1614). OEUVRES 9. 35.
6. THE INTRODUCTION TO THE DEVOUT LIFE II, 1.OEUVRES 3. 69. See also OEUVRES 26. 316, "Our Lord draws us to himself, wishing to give us these graces, and we resist!"
7. Letter 383, March, i608. OEUVRES 13. 383; see also 14. 21, 40.
8. Opuscula on how to transform our works by charity. OEUVRES 26. 65.
9. Preface to the INTRODUCTION. OEUVRES 3. 8.
10. See Ct 1. 4.
11. Conference 14, On Personal Judgment. OEUVRES 6. 250.
12. Preface to the Mystical Explanation of the Canticle of Canticles. OEUVRES 26. 11, speaking of the union with God achieved by devotion through the spiritual exercises.
13. See 2 Pet 1. 4.
14. TREATISE ON THE LOVE OF GOD VII.. I OEUVRES 5. 7.
15. Jn 6. 44.
16. Letter of 1605-1608. OEUVRES 13. 386
17. 1 Cor. 12. 3.
18. Preparation and Meditations for the Profession of 1616. OEUVRES 25. 423, based on Lev 1. 6. Also in Custom Book
19. Opuscula of #8. OEUVRES Z6. 43-44. Gives the program in brief.
20. Appendix to Conferences. OEUVRES 6. 415, 418. See also 14. 82.
21. Conference 12, On Simplicity. OEUVRES 6. 217-218.
22. INTRODUCTION V. 1. OEUVRES 3. 340. See also 13. Z68.
23. OEUVRES 22. 21-26. See also 26. 285.
24. TREATISE VI. 2. OEUVRES 4. 307.

25. IBID. V. 1. OEUVRES 4. 255. See also 13. 387.
26. IBID. V. 6. OEUVRES 4. 276.
27. IBID. VI. 6. OEUVRES 4. 323. Also TREATISE IX. 4 & Conf. 9.
28. IBID. VI. 3. OEUVRES 4. 31 2.
29. See Conference 20, On the Religious Profession. OEUVRES 6. 381.
30. OPUSCULA of #8. OEUVRES 26. 65.
31. Letter of June 8, 1618. OEUVRES 18. 238.
32. Letter of July 21, 1610. OEUVRES 14. 333.
33. Advice to a Visitandine. OEUVRES 26. 317. Lack of giving self to meditation is cause of immortification in religious.
34. Spiritual Directory, Article 2. OEUVRES 25. 138.
35. Advice to a Visitandine. OEUVRES 26. 317.
36. St. Jane de Chantal, On Prayer. WORKS 3. 263. See OEUVRES 10. 229.
37. Spiritual Directory, Article 3. OEUVRES 2.5. 139. See Col 3. 17.
38. See in his letters. OEUVRES 12. 336; 13. 32, 321; 14. 167.
39. TREATISE XI. 8 OEUVRES 5. 264. See also 21. 157.
40. Fragments of letter to St. Jane. OEUVRES 14. 104.
41. See Conference 18, On the Sacraments. OEUVRES 6. 342.
42. Letter of August 9, 1607. OEUVRES 13. 306.
43. In letters. OEUVRES 13. 60 and 93.
44. Collected Sermon 22. OEUVRES 9. 196.
45. St. Jane de Chantal, Conference 36. WORKS 2. 353-354.
46. See Custom Book of Visitation, Article 25.
47. Constitutions of the Visitation #1. OEUVRES 25. 252; see 26. 43.
48. INTRODUCTION II. 19. OEUVRES 3. 115.
49. Letter of April, 1608. OEUVRES 14. 8.
50. See INTRODUCTION II. 15 and IV 12.

51. Letter of May 24, 1610. OEUVRES 14. 306.

52. Answers of St. Jane de Chantal. Saudreau, MYSTICAL PRAYER 27.

53. "Short Treatise on Prayer, 11 WORKS 3. 267. See also SFDS in Conference 18, OEUVRES 6. 348-351; Letter of June 8, 1618-18.238.

54. See Collected Sermon 7, OEUVRES 9. 50. Also 13. 184.

55. Collected Sermon 7. OEUVRES 9. 49.

56. Collected Sermon 9. OEUVRES 9. 64.
