



## **A SALESIAN UNDERSTANDING OF PRAYER**

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### **1. SALESIAN THEOLOGY OF PRAYER:**

It is in the *Treatise on the Love of God* that Francis de Sales reveals to us how he had been introduced to the *Canticle of Canticles*. He had the good fortune to study under "the scholarly bishop of Aix, Gilbert Genebrard. From these lectures, as Lajeunie points out, Francis learns that "the history of the world and of salvation is, therefore, a history of love". Towards the end of his life, in one of his last Christmas sermons, Francis describes creation as the "first visitation" of love and the incarnation as the "second visitation" of love. It seems to me, that a proper understanding of a Salesian theology of prayer can only be understood by referring to *CREATION* and then, the *INCARNATION*.

#### **1.1 CREATION**

For Francis, the vestiges of God are to be found everywhere in created reality. Contemplating created reality leads us to an awareness of the Creator behind his created masterpiece. The originality of Salesian thinking consists in the fact that this creative act does not belong to the past, but is an ever present reality. God is constantly creating and speaking ceaselessly through his creation.

##### **1.1.1. The Human Person and Creation**

It is within a teleological framework that Francis situates the creation of the human person: created by God, destined for God. As the apex of creation, we are supremely revelatory of God's love in whose image and likeness we are made. Thus, reflecting on the mystery of what it means to be human leads us to an acknowledgment of God who has created us. Created us in such a fashion that we are made for companionship with Him.

Deep within us lies a desire for the good and the beautiful which arouse us, call us and gather us to their source which is God. However, to perceive God, who is the epitome of the beautiful and the good, involves a special type of seeing. It is an interior seeing involving contemplation (theoria) which is a dialogue between two beings who, in love, have access to beauty. This takes place at the deepest centre of our being, the supreme point of our spirit, wherein God resides in a special way.

### **1.1.2. God and Creation**

Reminiscent of the hebraic notion of being, not static but dynamic, God is ever present with His created reality. The fundamental characteristic of God is this movement, activity. He is an ecstasy of love. He pours Himself out into his creation. He is passionately involved with the world which he creates and sustains. This explosion of love, within God, desires to communicate itself ad extra. Thus, created reality is made from love and is called to return to its source which is Love. In this way the Salesian understanding has affinities with the Dionysian exitus and reditus schema. In other words, he borrows his concept of procession: all comes from the divine unity, all returns there.

## **1.2 INCARNATION**

It is above all in the enactment of the drama between God and the human person that we glimpse the superabundance of God's love, which is a *love without equal*. There is a qualitative leap in this outpouring of God's love towards humankind in the reality of the incarnation. Francis charts this new reality as a movement from the natural providence of God to the supernatural providence of God.

### **1.2.1. The Supernatural Providence of God**

It is in the context of God's desire to save the entire human family that Francis situates his thoughts on Providence, both natural and supernatural. Creation itself reveals the providence of God, but it is the incarnation, above all, that reveals the supernatural providence of God. Through the incarnation God unites Himself to our humanity in a unique way, revealing the superabundance of His love. But, even more incredible is that precisely through the incarnation, human nature participates in the divine life of the Trinity. Thus, Francis opts for the Scotus viewpoint declaring that only love, and not original sin, can explain this supreme gesture on the part of God to join our nature through the incarnation. Indeed, Supernatural Providence reveals that the very purpose of creation is, and always has been, Christ.

### **1.2.2. The Incarnation a Continuous Reality**

The incarnation reveals to us the love within the Godhead and His desire to communicate this love ad extra. The kenotic love of Jesus, his self-emptying is reciprocated by the Father's sacrifice of His only Son. Through the Spirit their love is poured into our hearts so that the incarnation is not simply a historical fact, but also, a continuous metaphysical and personal fact which is renewed in the centre of every person. Christ is not simply an exterior model to be initiated, but imprints his mystery in our heart. Thus, the image of God within us takes on a Christological dimension. Through the incarnation our natural being is reclothed with the beauty of the Son who becomes the *window* through which the Father gazes on us. Here we enter into the heart of Salesian Christocentrism where all of created reality moves towards a convergence with Christ the Lord.

### **1.2.3. Jesus reveals the Pure Love of God**

It is in the person of Jesus that the *Pure* love of God is made visible. A love which is a continual movement, a self-emptying as manifested in the incarnation and culminating in the crucifixion. Such a love reveals Jesus as "meek and humble of heart". On account of his humility he descends, lowering himself to become one with our nature. This humility is accompanied by a gentleness which invites us to participate in his love. It is these qualities which expose the vulnerability of God's love because it is both "poor and naked" and therefore, open to rejection by us. Its power does not lie in force, but in its ability to attract through gentleness. The purity of God's love is revealed in its nakedness and poverty because it is totally stripped of self-interest and loves us to excess.

## **2. THE CANTICLE OF CANTICLES**

The story of the Canticle of Canticles is the unfolding of this love story between God and humanity. Both creation and the incarnation are contained in this drama which enacts the human quest of searching for infinite love which can only be satiated in God. It is in this context that we can begin to understand that prayer is not something which *WE DO* but rather, is a response to God who draws us continually. It is God who takes the initiative. We are invited to respond in love to God who has first loved us into being. Prayer, then, is allowing ourselves to be possessed by the love of God and singing of that love.

### **2.1 The kiss of God**

In the Canticle of Canticles we have the soul (in the person of the shepherdess) sighing "Let him kiss me with a kiss of his mouth". For Francis, the incarnation is the culmination of this kiss between God and us, where Jesus assumes our human nature. The joining of the divine nature and human nature in Jesus is understood by Francis as the "kiss of God". Thus, the love story in *The Canticle* points to the incarnation, to Mary's fiat which seals the kiss of union, and to the way in which the Heart of God is drawn into our heart.

## **2.2 Draw Us to the Odour of Your Perfumes**

The use of olfactive imagery is common place in Oriental poetry, and prevalent in *The Canticle*. The image of God as perfume is evocative of his infinite goodness, beauty, sweetness, but above all, of his love. ie., of His desire to give of Himself, to pour himself forth. This is evident in the following quotation where this kenosis of God is described in terms of "diffusing" and "flowing" into the heart:

...the soul would not pray unless it were aroused to do so. However, as soon as it is aroused and feels those attractions, it prays that it may be drawn forward. When it is drawn, it runs, but still it would not run if the perfumes that draw, and by which it is actually drawn, did not enliven the heart by the power of their precious odour.

It is "the scent of the divine Beloved" that has the capacity to arouse and draw us. This is a scent that "is poured out" ceaselessly and not dependent on our response. It follows that the perfume of God precedes our response, indicating the unconditional nature of the divine initiative. The only power God exercises over us is his gentleness because "perfumes have no power to draw us to them except their sweetness". This, in turn, reveals two important characteristics of God's love towards us: In the first place, it reveals His amazing respect for our freedom; In the second place, it reveals the unconditional nature of his love.

## **2.3 The Breath of God that Inspires**

In order to capture the gentle stirrings of God's love at work in our life, Francis makes use of the image of breath. The image of breath is synonymous with the grace of God that awakens us and puts us on the path to conversion. Thus, the breath of God blows on "the sails of our spirit" and "gives movement to the ship of our heart". The breath within God (The Father and the Son breathe the Spirit) reveals the communication within God, and the breath that emanates from God, reveals His desire to communicate with us. The Father breathes "sweet allurements" by means of which He draws us to Himself; the Son breathes inspirations so as to "not only knock at the door of the human heart but to call the beloved soul to Him."

"With regards to God's breath, not only does it warm but it gives perfect life, since his divine Spirit is an infinite light." The notion of "warmth" and "light" obviously recalls another of Francis' images, the Sun, to evoke this sense of being "inspired" by God. Francis reiterates that we are free to allow ourselves "to be awakened" by God or "to continue sleeping". It is through "inspirations" that the Father draws us to Himself and this is the special mission of the Holy Spirit. Francis emphasizes the role of the Spirit in our creation and recreation. It is the same "breath of God" that breathes life into our soul at creation and then,

"breathes and infuses into our souls the inspirations of supernatural life" that we may become a life-giving Spirit (1Cor.15:41).

The human heart, for Francis, is the key to unlocking the dynamics of *PRAYER* because its restlessness, as Augustine had pointed out earlier, reveals that we "are made for God and will not rest until we rest in God". But, it also, reveals the nature of the person who has created us with this infinite capacity to receive love, God. Thus, I'm sure that Francis would agree with Von Balthasar's reworking of the Augustinian dictum, "your heart, O God, is restless until we rest in You". Francis acknowledges that nowhere is our being made in the image and likeness of God more evident, than when we examine the human heart. Prayer is, then, "heart speaking to heart".

### **3. SALESIAN PRAYER**

We express our love for God in two ways, according to Francis -affectively and effectively. In the first of these ways we grow fond of God, of what He likes; in the second we serve God, do what he enjoins. The first way unites us with God's goodness, the second urges us to carry out his will. In the first we find God pleasing, in the second he is pleased with us; In the first way we clasp God to our hearts in loving embrace, in the second we carry him in our arms by the practice of virtue (Sg.8:6)

We love God, in the first of these ways, principally by *Prayer*.

By the word prayer... I mean what St. Bonaventure meant when he said that prayer, widely speaking, embraces the whole of contemplative activity; what St. Gregory of Nyssa meant when he taught that "prayer is an interview or conversation between the soul and God"; also what St. Chrysostom had in mind when he asserted that "prayer is talking to God"; and finally, what St. Augustine and St. Damascene meant when they said that prayer is "an ascent, or uplifting of the mind toward God". If prayer is a talk or conversation between the soul and God, then he inspires us, we are alive to him and he lives in us".

The heart, for Francis, is the central place where prayer issues forth. It is our hearts that seek union with God in prayer. Our hearts are made for God and will only rest in him. What is prayer then, but "heart speaking to heart". In this dialogue of hearts, it is God always takes the initiative, he calls us to respond.

#### **3.1 Prayer is ... GOD'S INITIATIVE:**

God's desire for us is much greater than our desire for God. As St. John reminds us "we can love God because God has loved us first". God's grace precedes our response. Creation is the revelation of God's love which cannot be contained within God. We are the fruit of God's love, a love which gives life and seeks to

draw us into the fullness of life. This love is "an active, fruitful, fertile action that excites, invites and urges". God is a "continuous movement" who not only continues to create, but "preserves", "governs", "redeems", "saves" and "glorifies".

Thus, when we respond to God's love in prayer, we come to the realisation that we are able to do so, only because we have first received from God. Such a realisation, that all is gift, leads to gratitude, thanks, praise, the essence of prayer. As Francis says, "knowledge begets acknowledgment".

### **3.2 Prayer is ... *GOD'S COMMUNICATION*:**

It follows naturally from the above considerations that an *active* God, a God of continuous *movement*, should also be a God that desires to *communicate* with us. The explosion of love within God desires to communicate itself ad extra. God's movement outwards is in response to our restlessness of heart. He desires to fulfill our deepest longings. Thus, not only "can he communicate himself to us, but He will do so". God, then, communicates his love to us for our benefit. He seeks nothing for Himself. As Francis says "I look for nothing in their love but their happiness". Of course, it is in the incarnation that God chooses the most perfect way of communicating His love by uniting His nature to human nature. Prayer allows us to know in the depths of our hearts that we are in Christ, that we are "the beloved in whom God is well pleased".

### **3.3 Prayer is ... *COMPANIONSHIP WITH GOD*:**

Our very existence, according to Francis, is the gift of the Trinitarian God who "chose to create us *to have company with His Son*, to participate in his grace and glory". Created by God with the capacity to contemplate, we can plumb the depths of this reality. We can become aware that our end is union with God in love, and we are meant to know something of that love, of that relationship with God, in this present life, to know it by prayer and contemplation and in loving relationship one with another in God. Contemplative prayer involves a special type of seeing which is born from our faith relationship with God. It allows us to have access to His beauty:

Just like bees sucking the flowers to collect their honey, we meditate to collect the love of God, once it has been collected, we contemplate God and become attentive to his goodness because of the sweetness which love makes us discover there.

Francis, in keeping with the spiritual tradition, emphasizes that contemplation is a gift to be received, to be prepared for, rather than something we can train ourselves to do.

### **3.4 Prayer is ... LIVING JESUS:**

Prayer, in its essence, is allowing ourselves to be transformed by God into Christ. This is a painful process which strips us of our egoism. Pure love is characterized by abnegation of self as epitomized in Christ's passion. Francis presents Jesus as being literally stripped of his garments and spiritually stripped of any consolations. It is in this nakedness that we see the purity of his love, his total resignation to His Father's will. If prayer is learning to unite our will with the will of God then, the cost must be the cost of Calvary:

Theotimus, Mount Calvary is the mount of lovers. All love that does not take its origins from the Saviour's passion is foolish and perilous. Love and death are so mingled in the saviour's passion that we cannot have the one in our hearts without the other.

As in the epilogue of the Cantic of Canticles 8:6, love is paired with death, bringing us to the culmination of Jesus' stripping where body and soul are divided. Only Jesus on the cross can initiate us into the practice of divine love. This self-emptying through prayer is a painful process, but although we die, we rise to a new life in Christ. Thus, the image of God within us takes on a Christological dimension. Our natural being is reclothed with the beauty of the Son who becomes the *Window* through which the Father gazes on us. Here we enter into the heart of Salesian Christocentrism where all of created reality moves towards a convergence with Christ the Lord. The essence of Christian prayer, then, is allowing oneself to die so as to be born again in Christ through whom we have access to the Father.

## **4. HOW TO ... PRAY**

### **4.1 Preparation.**

Always put yourself in God's presence before beginning to pray. Ask for his help during your prayer session. Francis offers several ways to place ourselves in the presence of God:

- \* Realize that God is "in all things and all places".
- \* Recall that God is especially present in your heart, in the very centre of your spirit.
- \* Imagine Jesus gazing at you from heaven while you are at prayer.
- \* Imagine Jesus next to you, as you would a friend.

### **4.2 Meditation.**

After preparing for prayer, select a point or two to meditate on. The scriptures, in particular, offer much that we can ponder on, as they are a word of life, and a word for life. Francis advises us to remain with a topic if we derive some benefit from it, but to calmly move on to another if we can't extract "any honey out of it".

### **4.3 Affections and Resolutions.**

Our meditation should, then, produce feelings of love for God, compassion, awe, joy, and so on.

These feelings, in turn, should help us to make resolutions for our daily life. For example, the experience of being forgiven should, in effect, prompt us to become more forgiving and compassionate in our lives.

### **4.4 Conclusion and Spiritual Bouquet.**

Francis advises us to conclude our period of prayer by thanking God for what he has given us during our prayer time. We can also ask God to help us in the resolutions we have made. Finally, he encourages us to choose a point or two from our meditation and come back to these points from time to time during the day (spiritual bouquet).

"As birds have their nests at places to which they retire, and wild animals find safety in their thickets and woods, so our hearts should pick some place each day where they can retire at various times to refresh and renew themselves during their exterior preoccupations. Withdraw from time to time into your own heart, apart from the world, and converse heart to heart with God."

### **4.5 Prayer of Simple Regard.**

For Francis, "Contemplation is simply the mind's loving, unmixed, permanent attention to the things of God." Our destiny, the very reason for our creation, is to know and love and contemplate God and all His creation for eternity. This heavenly life, however, must and does begin here and now. We will find it if we but open our hearts to it. Francis compares meditation *to eating* and contemplation *to drinking*. The first involves effort on our part, the second is pure gift from God. Our longing to gain God's love causes us to meditate; love, when gained, leads to contemplation. In short, Francis says, "we meditate to awaken love, we contemplate because we love". How do we prepare for Contemplation? since it is gift, it depends on God's generosity, we can prepare through meditation which places us in a position to receive, surrender ourselves to God's love. Our effort in meditation, then, gives way to God's action as he pours his love into our souls. Our attention is then fixed in a loving regard on God. Contemplation consists, not in thinking much, but in loving much.



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