



**FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE:
ONE COLLEGE STUDENT'S (FRANCIS DE SALES 1567-1622)
STRUGGLE WITH TRUTH**

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When I was Academic Dean at De Sales University, I once asked one of our students what she thought about the new art instructor we had hired. She replied, "He's a little unusual. He makes us draw the shadows instead of the objects themselves." I remarked, "Well, that seems to me to be a good way of appreciating the light because there are no shadows without light." This novel approach evidently worked well for the instructor, and also for his students.

However, in our personal lives there is a danger of focusing on the shadows because we can easily become mesmerized by them and fail to see the light, especially with the current war in Iraq and the threat of terrorism. As one writer observed, "The agony of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane has seemed to many commentators, Christian and otherwise, a profound metaphor for the human condition today."¹ The words of one of the foremost Catholic theologians of the 20th century still ring true today:

Fear mercilessly grips the human throat. It fills the psychiatrists' consulting rooms, populates the psychiatric hospitals, increases the suicide figures, lays blast-bombs, sets off cold wars and hot wars. We try to root it out of our souls like weeds, anesthetizing ourselves with optimism, trying to persuade

¹ George Weigel, *The Truth of Catholicism* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2001), 16

ourselves with a forced philosophy of hope; we make all possible stimulants availableWe invite people to engage in every form of self-alienation"²

The only issue I would take with von Balthasar's statement is that optimism is anesthetizing. (But I will tackle that later). The same fears, multiplied, still "mercilessly grip the human throat." Condoleeza Rice, National Security Advisor, stated at a National Prayer Breakfast meeting last February, "Struggle frees us from our fragility and leads to self-knowledge." I would slightly modify this by saying, "Struggle frees us from the **fear** of our fragility." It is essentially the fear of death, the fear of our annihilation that is the root cause of all of our fears. When we honestly and courageously confront the fear of our fragility in the light of our Catholic and Christian faith, we not only gain deeper insights into the knowledge of ourselves, but also of God, of others and our world.

My talk this evening is entitled, "From Despair to Hope: One College Student's Struggle with Truth." The student I would like to dwell on is St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), the French-speaking Savoyard Bishop of Geneva and one of the foremost spiritual writers of the Catholic Church. He is most noted for two works, the *Introduction to a Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*.

As a student at the Jesuit College of Clermont in Paris, he suffered from severe depression when he was about 18 or 19 years old, that cast a long and distressing shadow over his student life for about six weeks and almost led him to despair of his salvation.

The effect of this struggle is poignantly described by one of his close friends, who learned about it from those who lived with the saint at that time:

He began to fail daily, and because of his tears, seemed to be in agony, crying day and night with increased sobs. He filled the air with moaning and redoubled his efforts to pierce heaven and tried to touch the heart of God, either to be delivered from every temptation, or that, comforted by God, he might persist courageously in his faith. Finally, the unchangeable hope that he had placed in his mercy [was not in vain]³

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *In the Fullness of Faith: On the Centrality of the Distinctively Catholic* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 20]. (cited by George Weigel, *The Truth of Catholicism* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2001), 16

³ Deposition of P. de Quoex: "Tous les jours il défaillait, et, à force de pleurer, semblait en agonie; versant des larmes jour et nuit et redoublant ses tristes sanglots; il fatiguait l'air de ses lamentations, en frappait le Ciel à coups redoublés et essayait de toucher le coeur de Dieu, soit pour être délivré de toute tentation, soit pour que, réconforté par Lui, il résistât courageusement dans la foi, et qu'enfin l'espérance immuable qu'il avait placée en sa miséricorde [ne fut pas vaine]" (As cited in *Oeuvres de saint François de Sales, évêque et Prince de Genève et Docteur de l'Eglise, édition complète*, 26 vols. (Annecy: J. Niérat, 1892-1932), 22, xvi.

St. Jane de Chantal, his closest friend, tells us in her testimony at the first process of his canonization that during this struggle or trial, he was not able to sleep or eat. This is how strongly it affected him.

To deal with this struggle, Francis resorted to spiritual aspirations or ejaculatory prayers drawn principally from the Psalms, which we are told, he wrote down from memory, in order to calm his fears and, "so to speak, pierce the heart of God with all of these arrows of love and pain and to move the very bowels of his mercy"⁴

Happily, we have some of the notes that he made during this trial in Paris. The following gives the flavor and fervor of his agonizing experience: "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy because my soul has placed its confidence in you, and in the shadow of your wings, I will hope for this evil to pass. I will cry aloud to the most high God, to God who has done what is good for me... God will send his mercy and his truth...(Ps. 57, 56 (in the Vulgate), as cited in OEA, 22, 15-16). Along the same line, he prays, "According to the greatness of your mercy, hear me, according to the truth of your salvation"⁵

In passing, let us just note he not only selects those passages from the Psalms that stress God's loving mercy, but also the importance of truth, of God's truth.

The nature and cause of this temptation, trial or struggle are disputed by the saint's biographers. It is my opinion that La Jeunie in his critical biography of the saint gives the most plausible explanation. The saint is in the prime of his youth, strongly influenced by the pagan authors of Classical Antiquity that formed an integral part of the *ratio studiorum* or liberal arts education at the Jesuit college and whose writings were not always the most edifying.⁶ This biographer sees the struggle in Paris essentially as the tension of the flesh with the spirit and explains:

This work will be cited as OEA in future references. All English translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

⁴ P. de Quoex, "Par ces oraisons jaculatoires tirées de tous les Psaumes et Cantiques du Roi-Prophète que, grace à la très heureuse mémoire don't il était doué, il retenait au plus profond de son âme, il calmait les angoisses de son coeur désolé, et, pour ainsi dire, perçait le coeur de Dieu par toutes ces flèches d'amour et de douleur, et émouvait les entrailles de sa miséricorde" (As cited in OEA, 12, xvii).

⁵ "Ayez pitié de moi, ô Dieu, ayez pitié de moi parce que mon âme s'est confiée en vous; et à l'ombre de vos ailes, j'espérerai jusqu'à ce qu'il iniquité soit passée. Je crierai au Dieu très-haut, au Dieu qui m'a fait du bien. ...Dieu enverra sa miséricorde et sa vérité...[Ps. 57] (OEA, 22, 15-16).[Written in Latin]

"Selon la grandeur de votre miséricorde, exaucez-moi, selon la vérité de notre salut" [Ps. 69] (OEA, 22, 16). [Written in Latin]

⁶ "It is the custom, Castellion tells us, to have children read Lucien in Greek and Terence in Latin; the former describes Jupiter's adulterous adventures and Mercury's theiveries; the latter, shameful practices of

Francis was discovering in himself a new man, or rather he was becoming a man according to nature, and the reality of the flesh shocked his fine ideal, the ideal of virginity for the love of Christ. He was 'human to his fingertips' (*'tant homme que rien plus'*), extremely sensitive, with a lively imagination, timorous by nature yet hot-blooded. Though he avoided brothels, he attended a court that disguised vice under a mantle of glory.⁷

To fully understand the nature of his struggle, it is helpful to mention the other influences on his life at that time. In addition to pursuing a liberal arts education at Clermont, his mentor permitted him to study theology as well. He was fortunate to attend the lectures on the *Song of Songs* or *Canticle of Canticles* given by the renowned Benedictine teacher of Hebrew and scripture scholar, Gilbert G n brard, to whom he later pays tribute in his *Treatise on the Love of God*, which is considered to me a lengthy commentary on the *Canticle*. G n brard's approach to the *Canticle* opened up new horizons for the young student and made him appreciate God's relation with humanity as one great and glorious love story.

The theological circles of Paris and, in fact, all of Europe at that time were abuzz with debates and rancorous disputes on predestination, primarily because of the enormous influence the Reformers, Calvin and Luther, had throughout the 16th century. Calvin taught that God from all eternity predestines some people to heaven and others to perdition independent of their merits or demerits.⁸ Surprisingly, the Sorbonne, the great bastion of Catholic theology and theologians, taught that St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas espoused the same notion of predestination.⁹ Francis was strongly tempted to believe that he was predestined to perdition.

the young, the perversity of the courtesan and the infamy of the procurer" (E.J. Lajeunie, O.P., *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, The Thinker, His Influence*, trans. Rory O'Sullivan, OSFS (Bangalore, India: S.F.S. Publications, 1986), I, 55 where he refers us to Goulu's life of St. Francis de Sales, 34).

⁷ Lajeunie, I, 66.

⁸ "Nous appelons Pr determinatione le conseil  ternel de Dieu par lequel il a d termin  ce qu'il vouloit faire d'un chascun homme. Car il ne les cr e pas tous en pareille condition, mais *ordonne les uns   la vie  ternelle, les autres    ternelle damnation* ... Le Seigneur a une fois constitu  en son conseil  ternel et immuable, lesquelz il vouloit prendre   salut, et lesquelz il vouloit laisser en ruine" (*De Institutione Christiana*, 1560, as cited OEA, 22, xiv). Luther had already taught essentially the same idea. This teaching was condemned in 1520 by Pope Leo X in the Bull *Exsurge*

⁹ "Dieu n'a pas d cr t  le salut de tous. Il faut donc conclure que ceux qui sont priv s du salut, le sont, non par suite de leur propre refus, mais par le refus de Dieu lui-m me" (Labauche, *Le ons de th ologie dogmatique* (Paris, Bloud, 1908) cit  par Francis Vincent: Saint Fran ois de Sales, *Directeur d' mes* (Paris, Beauchesne, 1923J), p. 37 as cited in OEA, 22, xv).

"Dieu pr destine ses saints   la gloire uniquement par son bon plaisir, ind pendamment de la pr vision de leurs oeuvres, et, en vertu de ce d cret a priori, leur conf rant les gr ces n cessaires pour qu'ils puissent m riter cette gloire" (Homan-Letourneau, *Vie de saint Fran ois de Sales* ( d. 1909), tome Ier, liv. I, chp. Iii, p. 55, as cited in OEA, 22, xv).

"Que ces doctrines soient exactement, la premi re de saint Augustin, l'autre de saint Thomas, nous n'avons pas   l'examiner ici; il suffit qu'elles fussent alors enseign es sous le nom de ces deux Docteurs" (OEA, 22, xv).

One day, when he was particularly overwhelmed by the feeling of despair, he slipped into the Marian chapel of the Dominican church of St. Etienne des grès, located in the Latin Quarter. He knelt down before the statue of *Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance*, commonly known as the Black Virgin of Paris, and made this very moving prayer of complete abandonment to God's will:

Whatever may happen, O God, you who hold all things in your hand, whose ways are justice and truth, whatsoever you may have decreed concerning me in the eternal secret of your predestination and reprobation, you whose judgments are unfathomable, you who are a very Just Judge and Merciful Father, I will love you always, O Lord, at least in this life! At least in this life will I love you, if it is not given me to love you in eternity! ... If my merits demand it, and I am to be one damned among the damned,... grant that I should not be among those who curse your name. (OEA, 22, 19-20, as translated by R. O'Sullivan, Lajeunie, I, 71).

Then, he picked up a prayer card near the statute and recited the Marian prayer, the "Memorare," and, as St. Jane de Chantal testified, "he found himself instantly and completely cured, and it seemed to him that the evil fell like leprous scales at his feet"¹⁰

The Padua Crisis

If the emotional and psychological struggle subsided in Paris, the intellectual struggle with the problem of predestination, the desire for a deeper understanding of this experience, was renewed when, a few years later, he was a law student at the University of Padua. The existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard tells us that we live our life forward but we understand it backward. Francis was so taken with this problem of predestination and the positions he believed to be those of Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas that he filled six copy books with his thoughts.¹¹ For Francis, it was crucial to have a true understanding of this problem because it involved the concept of human freedom, "psychological and emotional freedom, the need for good works, the [value] of human activity, and ultimately, the very ... value of life itself" (Lajeunie, 81). Moreover, it raised questions about the very goodness and justice of God and the moral authority of such theological giants as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

¹⁰ "...en ce mesme instant se trouva parfaitement et entièrement gueri; et il luy sembla que son mal estoit tombé sur ses pieds comme des escailles de lepre" (as cited in OEA, 22, xx).

¹¹ Lajeunie, 81.

He could not swallow the teaching falsely presented as that of St. Thomas Aquinas, that those predestined for perdition existed solely to give glory to God's justice. What Francis rejected with "horror" was "the notion that God would will the sinner and his sin in order to demonstrate his justice" (Lajeunie, I, 87). Not being able to reconcile his understanding of God's goodness and mercy and the nature of human freedom with this position, he humbly but decisively decided on what he believed from childhood to be the true position on predestination. viz., that God predestines us to glory by the good actions we perform through the gift of his grace, and we are predestined to perdition by the evil and sinful actions we freely choose to commit. The foreknowledge of God is not the cause of our perdition but our own free actions are.

We need to look more carefully at his theological notes to see how they shaped his self-understanding, his knowledge of God, and his relationship to others.

Self-knowledge, Knowledge of God and Human Solidarity

The theological reflections he made as a graduate student at the University of Padua are extremely valuable for his understanding of the significance of this experience which was a turning point in his life and thought. What strikes us from the outset is the way in which he approaches the problem. He formulates the question of sin and predestination in terms of personal responsibility and of his solidarity with other human beings. The ties that bind us to others and particularly to our parents in no way harm our individuality. It is Christ who gives us more human perspectives by his coming. He zeroes in on scriptural texts that stress individual responsibility "The son will not bear the iniquity of the father, but it is the sinful soul that will die of itself."¹² In his eyes, it is Christ in his person and his life who realizes completely this prophecy. Christ is the one who wipes away communal guilt and holds the individual responsible.¹³

His observation here on individual responsibility has a great deal of relevance today when our society, judging from some of the jury awards in civil suits and jury decisions in criminal cases, seems to believe that people with the deepest pockets are most responsible or that socio-economic factors are to be blamed for the grievous misdeeds committed by individuals. (Recount jury judgment of man who bought a new Winnebago, driving down an interstate, put it in cruise control and went in the back to make himself a cup of coffee. The Winnie crashed; the man sued because it didn't

¹² *The Opuscles*, 1:1; *Oeuvres*, 22:63-67; The scriptural texts he quotes are from Jeremiah 31:29 and Ezech. 18:2,20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

specify in the owner's manual that you couldn't do this, was awarded over \$1.5 million and given a new Winnebago!)

So as not to become proud and haughty in the independent position he takes on the question of predestination, the saint declares himself ready to exchange all knowledge "in order to know the one who is the knowledge of the Father, 'Christ crucified.'" ¹⁴ Of course his point of departure is revelation, but to arrive at the knowledge of Christ and at the same time the knowledge of himself, he is independent and critical in his thinking. Respectfully but decisively, he sets aside the opinions of St. Augustine and St. Thomas, and opts for the salvific will of God towards all sinners, a will, which he envisions as presiding over the creation of the universe. The opinion of the Thomists leaves him dumbfounded and "lifting his eyes upward" toward God, he hears this comforting answer: "I do not will the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live....I have made you like all other things, for myself. My will is nothing other than your sanctification, and my soul hates nothing that it has made." ¹⁵ He turns to the God of mercy and forgiveness, and hears God say, "my name is not the 'One Who Condemns' but 'Savior.'" (OEA, 12, 65-66]

While reflecting on his deliverance from this struggle, he described the experience as if he were one of the many people in the Gospel that were touched by the healing power of Jesus. He sees himself as taking part in salvation history just as these people did by their direct contact with Christ. This tendency of identifying himself with the persons and events of the Bible clearly illustrates that for him salvation can be understood, evaluated and achieved only in the terms of what God did for his people. (cf. OEA, 12, 42). In his mind the Christian vocation consists essentially of being called to a communitarian life. In his *Meditations on the church* (unfortunately more commonly known as the *Controversies*), he stresses the idea that the first effect of our predestination is the invitation to live with others. "Now it was for a good reason that the Christian people were called Church or convocation, because the first benefit that God has given to man to put him in grace, is to call him to the Church. This is the first effect of predestination." (OEA, 1, 42). This is an interesting and intriguing twist to the whole problem of predestination and forms for him the fundamental principle of human solidarity and of his ecclesiology, his conception of the nature of the Church.

Essentially, Francis sees the destiny of a Christian as being inextricably joined to the destiny of all humanity. It is not simply a vocation but a "con-vocation" (in Latin, *convocare* means to be called with

¹⁴ Loc. cit.

¹⁵ Ibid., 42.

other people). As a result we cannot know ourselves fully apart from others, apart from the ecclesial assembly in particular. The rather important place that this idea occupies in his thought becomes evident if we further examine how he understood his struggle at Paris with the problem of predestination. He realizes that self-knowledge is developed and deepened by one's relationship to the Church while meditating on these words of Isaiah. "Come to the *mountain of the Lord*, Let us go to the temple of the God of Jacob so that He will teach us his ways... For from Sion will come the law and from Jerusalem the oracle of the Lord" (Is, 2:3)

It is this same verse, "Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord," which summarizes for him this whole experience of the knowledge of self, of God, of the Church and of others. He uses these words to describe this great crisis in his life. To achieve knowledge of himself, he had to climb this "mountain of the Lord" which was for him a symbol of the Church as it was for the Fathers. In his eyes the true oracle for self-knowledge and self-development does not reside at Delphos ("Know thyself") but on the "mountain of the Lord", that is, in the Church. It is here that we find the true "oracle of the Lord." Although his experience at Paris was a profoundly personal one, it cannot be completely understood except in the light of the ecclesial designs of God for all humanity.¹⁶

The relationship between the oracle at Delphi and the role of the Church in the knowledge of oneself becomes more evident in a sermon that the saint preached about the same time that he was working on his *Treatise on the Love of God*.¹⁷ When he tells us that the spouse in the *Canticle of Canticles* "places the first elements of the knowledge of God in the knowledge of self," we can see some areas of agreement with Erasmus (1469-1536) and some of the independent thinkers of his day (Charron, La Mothe Le Vayer). Erasmus, known as the Prince of Christian humanists, saw the obligation and the necessity of studying and knowing oneself as arising from Sacred Scripture, particularly from the *Canticle of Canticles*. Like Erasmus, Francis sees a close connection between the Delphic oracle and the same verse of the *Canticle of Canticles*: "If you do not know yourself, O most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the flocks and lead the kids to pasture near the dwelling of the shepherds." (OEA, 8, 80).

In his exegesis of this verse, Francis considers it a response to the preceding verse where the spouse represents "the voice of human nature in search of its happiness." He goes on to say, "The spouse answers. He places the first elements of the knowledge of God in the knowledge of self: 'If you do not know yourself, oh most lovely one.' As if he were to say: 'Do you

¹⁶ OEA, 22, 66. For the idea of the Church as the "mountain of the Lord," see OEA, 1, 135.

¹⁷ OEA, 8, 74-75. This sermon was written in 1612.

want to be sure...begin by the knowledge of yourself.” To emphasize, like Erasmus, that self-knowledge is basically a problem of love, he make his thought more explicit: “If you do not know yourself, oh most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the flocks, that is to say of your different affections. Lead your kids to pasture, that is to say your evil affections” (OEA, 8, 80), i.e., put aside your evil inclinations.

If we remember that this sermon was delivered at the time he was working on and planning the *Treatise on the Love of God*, and that his knowledge and love of *the Canticle of Canticles* was rooted in his student days at Paris along with his personal struggle, we can better appreciate the human dimensions or the anthropological orientation of the opening chapters of this great spiritual classic. Here he does nothing more than follow the principle enunciated in this sermon, namely that the knowledge of God springs from the knowledge of self. He does not begin by considering the attributes of God but with the beauty, nature and function of our human faculties. The tone is set by the very first chapter which is entitled: “For the Beauty of Human Nature God Has Given Dominion over All the Faculties of the Soul to the Will.” (OEA, 4, 23). These opening chapters deal with our affections and our passions and the manner in which we must shape our personality and our relations with God and with others through the proper use of the gift of freedom. It also sets forth the relationship between human freedom and love, when he states that “Love has neither convicts (*forcenés*) nor slaves.” (*Treatise*, Bk. 1, chp. 6).

So his sermon gives the rationale for the basic orientation of this work and of his whole spirituality, but rooted in his excruciating experience in Paris. The most original aspect of the notion of self-development and of human flourishing in his thought is the ecclesial aspect that he gave to the interpretation of this verse of the *Canticle of canticles*. Self-knowledge implies the knowledge of one’s common destiny in the assembly of love, which is the Church. Setting aside the opinion of Sts. Ambrose, Gregory and Bernard who interpret the verb “leave,” that is “be gone,” as a reproach, Francis follows the interpretation of the foremost exegetes of his day. “For my part, I do not see a reproach here but a benevolent counsel which teaches us the way we must begin in our search for God. ‘If you do not know yourself, go out of [yourself]’; that is to say, you will go out of [yourself].”¹

For both Erasmus and Francis de Sales the verb “leave” represents an invitation to a knowledge of oneself conceived as a voyage outside of oneself; a voyage of love and ecstasy because we do not contain within ourselves the complete explanation of ourselves. The direction of this search for God and for our own identity is not turned exclusively inward. It is not meant to isolate or alienate us from others but calls us to go out of ourselves. So it is ecstatic in this sense. It is precisely here that Francis parts company with Montaigne (1533-1592), his contemporary, and the Ancients

who over-emphasized the introspective aspect of the knowledge of self. "The oracle of the Lord," in contrast with the Delphic oracle, leads us to consider our relations with others as necessary for self-knowledge. This is why Francis follows the interpretation of his contemporaries and of Erasmus. Like them, he understands this verse of the *Canticles* as an invitation to put oneself in contact with the Church and the Fathers. Their meaning would be: " 'If you do not know, Oh soul, where I rest at midday, follow the tracks of the flocks' of the ancient Fathers, follow the recognized and common doctrine and lead your kids to pasture near the tent of the pastors, that is to say, of the Bishops proposed to the faithful by the Council of Councils, the apostolic seat."¹⁸

For Francis, the teaching of the Fathers of the Church is "the Gospel explained, "Sacred Scripture expounded.... for they have been the instruments by which God has communicated to us the true meaning of his Word."¹⁹ So the official teaching of the Church, especially based on the doctrine of the Fathers, for our saint, is necessary not only for developing and deepening our spiritual lives, but also and concomitantly for a deeper understanding of ourselves. We see this depth and richness of understanding of human nature reflected in the saint's writings and in his own life.

After having rejected the opinion of those mentioned above, he underscores the twofold meaning of the Delphic motto to highlight "the twofold ignorance" in which "we live with regard to ourselves:" 'Know yourself.' Socrates....says that the knowledge of ourselves consists in the knowledge of the excellence of our soul; others say that it is the knowledge of our baseness with regard to our bodies...." ⁱⁱ As a reminder of our lowliness, Francis reminds his listeners that God gave the name of "Adam" to humanity, a name that signifies that which is drawn from the soil, from the earth, that is, earthly or terrestrial. Even though our origin is supposed to make us think of death, he ends this sermon on a positive note, namely that self-knowledge leads us to consideration of the sublime dignity of our soul because it is the image and likeness of God.

Conclusion

From the long, disturbing shadow of despair that hung over him, Francis comes to see the bright light of the truth about his humanity, about

¹⁸ At the end of this sermon, he uses the story of the Greek painter, Phidias, and his painting of Minerva. We find the same story in the *Treatise* (Bk. 4, chp. 4) but used in a different way.

¹⁹ Mais qu'est-ce autre chose la doctrine des Peres de l'Eglise que l'Evangile expliqué, que l'Escriture Sainte exposee? Il y a a dire entre l'Escriture Sainte et la doctrine des Peres comme entre une amande entiere et une amande cassee, de laquelle le noyau peut estre mangé d'un chacun, ou comme d'un pain entier et d'un pain mis en piéces et distribué. Au contraire donq il faut s'en servir, car ilz ont esté les instrumens par lesquelz Dieu nous a communiqué le vray sens de sa Parole" (OEA, XII, 305-306, Letter to Archbishop of Dol).

God and about the humanity of others. He was desperately searching for the Truth that is at the same time beauty and goodness. His struggle in Paris led him from the depths of despair to the heights of hope to fashion an optimistic and positive spirituality. It is not an 'anesthetizing optimism,' as von Balthasar would have it, that ignores the shadows of our lives, but one that makes us focus on the light of faith which illumines every aspect of our lives. It is an optimism born of struggle and hope in the face of the shadowy side of our human existence and helps to fashion an encouraging and positive idea of human perfection, viz. "perfection consists in struggling against our imperfections." (*Introduction to a Devout Life*, I, chp. 5). So he sees this as a life-long battle.

The truth that our humanity and our human freedom matter emerged from his grappling with the notion of predestination. He comes to understand that "freedom is from God and for God" and that it is given to us so that we can love.²⁰ He learned through his struggles that there is no true and lasting love without freedom. Our free choices shape the kind of human being we become and not some implacable, mysterious and tyrannical god. With the wondrous gift of freedom comes individual responsibility, a responsibility that cannot be shirked or dismissed no matter how congenial our tort laws may be to a disturbing, disquieting and ever growing sense of irresponsibility. The idea of freedom and responsibility that he espoused is a healthy antidote for the notions of determinism, whether biological or socio-economic, that are put forth with great self-assurance in the lecture halls of some of our most prestigious universities.

We see in Francis' struggle the essential relationship between freedom and truth, a question that Fr. Richard John Neuhaus understands to have enormous consequences because of the distorted notions of freedom that permeate our society. So he forcefully and convincingly states:

The question includes ecclesial obedience to truth, as Catholics believe the truth is made known. We are bound by the truth, and when we are bound by the truth, we are bound to be free. The relationship between truth and freedom is as true for non-Catholics or, indeed for non-Christians as it is true for Catholics, as is magnificently argued by John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth)... The Catholic insight about human freedom, an insight that we dare to say has universal applicability, is that we are bound to be free. The truth, in order to be understood, must be loved, and love binds. And so also with the apostolic community that embodies and articulates the truth."²¹

²⁰ John R. Sachs, S.J., *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Pressm 1991), 28.

²¹ Richard John Neuhaus "The Persistence of the Catholic Moment," *First Things*, (February 20023): 29-30.

Francis de Sales understood this relationship very clearly and embodied it in his personal life and in his teaching. He believed that there is such a thing as objective truth and that our minds are bound to love and accept it, cost what it may.

As we noted, his self-understanding is inextricably joined to his concept of God. True self-knowledge leads to the beginning of the knowledge of God. The scriptural passages that he latched on to, while swimming in a sea of a not-so-quiet desperation, were those that proclaimed God's goodness, mercy, and forgiveness rather than his justice and judgment. This led him to distill his understanding of humanity in a striking, positive and comprehensive manner: "Man [humankind] is the perfection of the universe. The mind is the perfection of man. Love is the perfection of the mind and charity [the love of God] is the perfection of love." (*Treatise*, Bk. 10, chp. 10).

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