

Salesian Vision of Holiness: A Spirituality for the Imperfect

"We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures. We are the sum of the love of God and of his son, our Lord Jesus Christ." (John Paul II).

Introduction

Fr. Ryan's first presentation focused on "A Basic Vision of Holiness and Vocation." I would like to talk about St. Francis de Sales' conception of holiness, and characterize it as a spirituality for the imperfect.

Signs of Getting Older:

Those of you who are from my era will appreciate and identify with the following signs of getting older, and those of you who don't at this time, will certainly get to recognize them soon enough. So here they are:

Getting Older

You know all the answers, but nobody asks you any questions

You get winded playing checkers

You stop to think and sometimes forget things. Sometimes you get irritated

It is their discontent and their dissatisfaction that turn us off. Since the very idea of perfection was a turn-off, St. Francis de Sales tried to present the pursuit of holiness in such a way that it would be a "turn-on" for everyone, but especially for lay people, who considered it to be simply out of their reach and frankly unattractive and unappealing - particularly the distorted notions of holiness that were floating around in his day and exist in various forms in our own day. This is why his stated purpose in the first part of the *Introduction to a Devout Life* is to turn the simple desire for holiness into a firm resolution by making it attractive and realizable. He envisions perfection as consisting in struggling against our imperfections. Here's what he says in one of the opening chapters of this spiritual classic with which you are all familiar:

The work of purging the soul neither can nor should end except with our life itself. We must not be disturbed at our imperfections, since for us perfection consists in fighting against them

way of trying to let God into their lives through their physical as well as their spiritual wounds. For them, it is a way of opening themselves to God.

Sin and Spirituality

These wounds are what religion calls our 'sins', psychologists our 'sickness' and philosophy terms our 'errors'. De Sales has a very comforting and consoling observation about our sins with regard to striving for perfection. "Sin is shameful," he says, "only when we commit it; when it has been converted by confession and repentance it becomes honorable and salutary" (*Devout Life*, I, chp. 19, p. 71). This is reminiscent of the "*O felix culpa*" ("O happy fault") of the Exsultet sung at the Easter Vigil. St. Francis de Sales expresses this same idea with regard to our imperfections: "Hate your imperfections," he says, "because they are imperfections but love them because they make you see your nothingness and emptiness and are subject to the exercise of the perfection, power and mercy of God" (OEA, 13, 167). So we are to have a kind of love-hate relationship with our imperfections. Hate them because they get in the way of our getting closer to God and to one another, but love them because they are the wounds that let God in.

Myth of Orestes

A similar idea is expressed by Scott Peck in his best seller *The Road Less Traveled* when he interprets the myth of Orestes. You may rec

Mello, *One Minute Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday-Image, 1988), p. 116 as cited by Kurtz, p. 29).

A little caution is needed here. This image can only go so far because it can imply that we are mere puppets on a string, and it can easily give the impression that to get closer to God we have to sin. And we all know what St. Paul has to say about that, viz., that we do not sin so that grace can abound in us. (See Rom. 6:1).

To Be Human Is To Be Imperfect

Because of cultural differences, a number of you might not appreciate this analogy from the game of baseball. So I beg for your

father was finished, he said that his son also wanted to go to confession. Fr. Finnegan, not knowing exactly how to evaluate the level of understanding of the boy, began by asking him some questions. "What has God done for you?", he asked him. And the boy answered by giving the names of his family members and of the family pets. Then he asked him, "And what have you done for God," The boy answered, "I be me."

This response certainly shows a level of understanding, of self-acceptance and of self-giving that many people unfortunately never reach in their lifetime. This supposedly retarded boy considered the members of his family and the family pets as gifts from God and clearly understood that the most precious and most valuable gift he could give back to God was himself. In a word, he saw the hand of God, the sacred, manifested in his relationship to the members of his family and also to God's creation. He had true humility as Francis de Sales describes it in the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, viz., a virtue that flows from a truthful and grateful acknowledgment of the general and particular gifts that God has given us.

The virtue of humility is based on the whole truth about ourselves. Although humility is an acknowledgment of our greatness and giftedness, it is also an acceptance of the totality of our being, of our grandeur and of our littleness, or as our saint puts it 'our abjection,[which] is lowliness, meanness and baseness in us.' In this sense, the virtue of humility is akin to the expression "poor in spirit" praised by Jesus as one of the beatitudes. For de Sales, "humility is true knowledge and voluntary acknowledgment of our abjection" (*Devout Life*, III, ch. 6, p. 139). In fact, it is a love of our abjection. This expression might, at first, repel us since it seems to suggest that we should be down on ourselves. I think that Dr. Wendy Wright, a well-known Salesian scholar, has captured the essence of what de Sales means when he says that humility is loving our abjections:

To love our abjections is to love ourselves as we are loved, in our wholeness. It is also to have compassion for ourselves. It is to see that the true place of transformation is not in our gifts but in our weaknesses. It is to know ourselves wounded yet beloved and thus to know each other most truly. It is not in our strengths that we find each other, but in our lack. For in our need we call each other forth. To love our abjections is to shatter the images of self-perfection we would like to project. It is thus to enter into the mystery of loving all that is human, and from there to begin to love all humans truly. (*Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God*, p. 87)

This beautifully ties together the importance of the virtue humility for loving ourselves as God loves us and laying the foundation of loving others in their "blessedness and brokenness" (W. Wright). Loving our abjections makes us love ourselves as we are loved by God and opens us to loving others. That is a very great insight into the nature of Salesian humility.

This notion of self-acceptance based on true humility would not square well with those who believe such an approach is detrimental to our self-esteem. It does, however, form the basis of Salesian spirituality and of the spirituality of communion. De Sales conceived all being as emanating from two principles - one God, which a

true not only among human creatures, but also among the angels, for their perfection is not free from imperfection" (*Ibid.*, 163). So a spirituality for the imperfect requires us to face honestly and courageously all aspects of our being.

