

□ Reading time: 11 min.

Christian spirituality is often perceived as the exclusive heritage of privileged souls, far removed from the concrete lives of those who inhabit the world. Saint Francis de Sales turns this view on its head with a radical proposal. God is not to be found in some ideal elsewhere, but in the beating heart of ordinary existence. A bishop, spiritual director, and writer of the 17th century, Francis de Sales developed a path to holiness accessible to all — to the merchant, the wife, the soldier, the farmer — without requiring them to abandon their state in life. The following text explores the pillars of this spirituality of the everyday: the loving acceptance of one's own condition, the concrete exercise of virtues, the encounter with God in daily events, and the transfiguration of the ordinary through charity.

God manifests His will and His love to me in and through daily life, which therefore constitutes the providential place where I can meet Him. Man is continually tempted to seek Him elsewhere, in another era or in a condition of life different from his own, whereas God is present in the life of each person. One might spontaneously think that the spiritual life is reserved for an elite and is contained in books that are obviously incomprehensible to common mortals.

Francis de Sales proposes a spirituality of “ordinary life,” of the everyday. He states this explicitly in the preface to the *Introduction to the Devout Life*: my intention – he wrote – is to instruct those who “by their condition are obliged to live an ordinary life externally.” Externally, nothing seems to distinguish them from others; internally, the fire of love inflames them. If Francis de Sales chose Our Lady of the Visitation as the patroness of his congregation, it is because “the most glorious Virgin performed this solemn act of charity towards her neighbour by going to visit and serve Saint Elizabeth during the laborious period of her pregnancy, and yet she composed the canticle of the *Magnificat*, the sweetest, the most elevated, the most spiritual and most contemplative that has ever been written.”

One must blossom where God has planted us

This saying, attributed to Francis de Sales, undoubtedly defines one of the fundamental traits of this spirituality. It consists first and foremost in frankly loving one's state in life. The reason is clear:

If we are saints according to our own will, we will never be saints as we ought to be; we must be so according to the will of God. Now, the will of God is that, for love of Him, you frankly love the duties of your state in life.

Here we touch upon the spiritual realism of Francis de Sales, who fears nothing so much as the multiplication of fruitless desires. One must serve God – he said to a young novice thirsty for immediate perfection – “in the human style, proper to time, while waiting to be able to do so one day in a divine or angelic way, according to the style proper to eternity.”

“It is a good thing to desire much, but one must also put order among one's desires and transform them into works as the right moment and the possibility present themselves. ... The work performed, even if very limited, is always more useful than great desires for things beyond our reach. God asks of us rather faithfulness in small things than ardour for great ones that do not depend on us.” He also said: “We often lose so much time trying to be good angels, while we neglect to be good men or good women.”

It is necessary, therefore, to learn to be pleased with being where we are. Francis de Sales, entirely reluctant to become a bishop, learned every day to love what God had willed for him. Jane de Chantal would have to learn to love her condition as a widow, because God had allowed it to happen.

A habitual saying of his goes like this: “One must not desire to reach perfection all at once; one must travel the common and ordinary path, which is the safest.” Not only is everyone called to the perfection of charity, in which holiness consists, but perfection is accessible to all. The conclusion of Francis de Sales is peremptory, “Wherever we live, we can and must aspire to the perfect life.”

The exercise of the virtues

Thus far, this spirituality seems rather passive: one must accept life as it presents itself, because it is our reality, and strive to love it as a manifestation of God's will and His love for us. But this is only the starting point. It is a matter of maintaining a positive attitude of intervention, which Francis de Sales calls "the exercise of the virtues."

After having recognised and accepted the present moment and the providential place where God "has planted us," one must "blossom" and produce fruit, always, however, taking into account the concrete situation and the vocation of each person. The classic text that defines the type of holiness to which all are called deserves to be quoted:

At creation, God commanded the plants to bear fruit, each according to its kind: in the same way he commands Christians, who are the living plants of his Church, to bear fruits of devotion, each according to his quality and his profession.

In the Christian life, everything is the fruit of the grace of the Holy Spirit, but the gift of grace requires the active collaboration of man. The acquisition of virtues requires in any case a good deal of effort, courage, constancy, and generosity. This is a true exercise (that is the meaning of the word asceticism) which is carried out in a climate of serenity and confidence in God. "Fear vices more than you love virtues," he wrote to a married woman who was impatient and scrupulous.

Once again, he specifies that virtues must be practised according to the vocation of each person and that "one must observe the particular commandments that each has by reason of his vocation."

Bishops have as their law to visit the flock entrusted to them, to instruct, correct, and console it; and I can remain in prayer for the whole week, fast for my whole life, but, if I do not do this, I am lost. A married person can perform miracles, but, if they do not fulfil the obligations they have towards their spouse and do not take care of their children, they are worse than an infidel, as Saint Paul says. And the same can be said of all the others.

But in order not to go astray by turning priorities upside down, one must know that there is a hierarchy among the virtues. For Francis de Sales, and this is beyond doubt, the first place belongs to love, while the other virtues accompany or follow it:

The queen bee does not go out to the fields unless she is accompanied by all her little people. In the same way, charity never enters a heart without drawing after it the whole retinue of the other virtues, which it arrays and trains as a captain does with his soldiers.

The other virtues, particularly gentleness, depend on charity. They are its manifestations and concrete realisations, or else means to acquire it, so much so that charity alone “makes us reach perfection.” There are, however, virtues of such universal use that they require a good supply to be constantly kept. They are not the virtues of angels, but rather those of men and women of flesh and blood:

If it pleases God to raise us to angelic perfections, we will also be good angels, but in the meantime let us exercise ourselves with simplicity, humility, and devotion in those small virtues whose conquest has been placed within our reach by Our Lord, such as patience, kindness, mortification of the heart, humility, obedience, chastity, tenderness towards our neighbour, bearing with their imperfections, diligence, and holy fervour.

There are still other lists of virtues, in which figure, for example, temperance, honesty, courage, simplicity, modesty, cordiality, and affability. Furthermore, certain spiritual attitudes, highly valued by Francis de Sales, are highlighted, which, however, should be considered rather as fruits of the virtues, or better, of the Holy Spirit, such as joy, peace, confidence, and abandonment to God.

What becomes of the traditional ascetic exercises in this framework of virtues? They are not abolished, but the emphasis is shifted. Thus, the author of the *Introduction*

to the Devout Life recommends work rather than fasting, moderation in pleasures rather than abstinence. Instead of always choosing the worst by way of penance, it is better to refrain from choosing:

I believe it is a greater virtue to eat without choosing what is put before you, and in the order in which it is put before you, whether it be to your taste or not, than always to choose the worst. For, although this second way of living seems more austere, the other nevertheless involves a greater resignation, because in this case one renounces not only one's taste, but also one's choice; and then, it is no small austerity to upset one's tastes and make them depend on chance; moreover, this type of mortification does not show, does not bother anyone, and is perfectly suited for social life.

Encountering God in the events of every day

The spiritual life outlined by Francis de Sales is not made “only to face extraordinary events, but mainly to live amidst the insignificant things of every day.” It is in the midst of the most banal daily life that the encounter with God can take place. The shepherdess Rachel watered her flock at the well, led her sheep to pasture every day, drew water from the well every day, and it is in the midst of these daily actions of hers that she met her spouse.

If there is an important point in Salesian spirituality, it is “holy indifference,” summarised in the formula, “Ask for nothing, refuse nothing.” The author starts from the principle that everything that happens in life (except sin) is willed by God or at least permitted by Him. Consequently, he who truly loves God prepares himself to welcome every event, whatever it may be, with a “simple disposition,” as if it came from the “divine good pleasure.”

God makes Himself known in the event, either by sending it or by simply permitting it. Once it has occurred, the person remains serene and accepts it. This is a passive attitude of resignation that seems a little unsettling, all the more so as the vocabulary of “good pleasure” is too reminiscent of the absolutism of the earthly prince. However, it must be borne in mind that the will to dispose oneself, to wait, to prepare also involves an active aspect that should not be overlooked. It is a

disposition of the will among the most recommended by Francis de Sales. It is founded, as has been said, on confidence in Providence, without which nothing happens in this world. But it can also be considered a human virtue that contributes greatly to maintaining a constant mood, especially in difficult moments of life. Indifference, Francis de Sales taught the Visitandines, is a virtue that is not acquired in five years, "it takes ten."

Regarding passivity and holy indifference, which becomes an extreme indifference of the will in relation to what will happen, the Bishop of Geneva sets things straight, taking the example of illness. "When you are ill" - he recommends to Philothea -, "obey the doctor, take the medicines, foods, or other remedies for the love of God." Then he adds, "Desire to get well, to serve Him; but do not refuse to suffer, to obey Him, and even prepare yourself to die, if it pleases Him, to praise Him and enjoy Him."

Welcoming the event will be all the easier the more one is persuaded, with Saint Paul, that "all things work together for good for those who love God." He says all things, that is, not only the joys and consolations, but also the trials, tribulations, and evils of this life, including sins. "Yes, even sins, from which God preserve us by His goodness, are directed by divine Providence to the good of those who belong to Him."

Uniting prayer and life

When he addresses the theme of prayer, the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* first undertakes to convince Philothea that it is a vital necessity. Following the classic distinction, Francis de Sales considers three types of prayer: vocal, mental, and vital.

He appreciates and recommends *vocal or external prayer*, whether it be liturgical, communal, or personal. But the quality of such prayer comes from within, from the heart of the one praying. "A single *Our Father*, said with feeling, is worth more than many recited in a hurry."

The Bishop of Geneva especially appreciated *mental prayer*, which he recommended to everyone, even the lay faithful. It is preferable because it effectively gives priority to the interior over the exterior. Its quality depends on

love, because prayer is worth as much as the love with which it is performed. This mental prayer, which he also calls prayer of the heart, has two forms: meditation and contemplation. Both nourish the spiritual life, as eating and drinking maintain the life of the body, “to meditate is to eat, and to contemplate is to drink.”

While mental prayer requires setting aside a certain time of the day for this particular exercise, there is nevertheless a third form of prayer, much closer to life and compatible with all sorts of occupations. It is vital prayer, which could also be called lived prayer or simply union with God. Occupations should in no way prevent union with God, and those who practise this form of prayer do not run the risk of forgetting God, any more than lovers risk forgetting each other:

Lovers of a human and natural love have almost always all their thoughts fixed on the beloved object, their heart full of transport for it, their mouth overflowing with its praises, and they lose no opportunity, in its absence, to testify to their passions with letters, nor do they let a tree pass without carving on its bark the name of the one they love.

In the midst of the daily activities of one who lives “pressed by temporal things,” it is always possible to find a moment of solitude to unite one’s heart with God:

Remember to always withdraw, O Philothea, into the solitude of your heart, while with your body you are in the midst of conversations and affairs. This solitude of the mind cannot be in the least hindered even by the multitude of those who are around you, because they are not around your heart, but only around your body, so that your heart remains all alone in the presence of God alone.

Thus, true prayer does not cause one to neglect the obligations of daily life, provided one imitates the strong woman of the Bible, of whom it is said that “she has used her hands in great enterprises, and her fingers have handled the spindle.” Hence his recommendations to the Baroness de Chantal, perhaps ill-advised at the beginning of her spiritual life: “Meditate, elevate your spirit, carry it to God, or rather, draw God into your spirit; these are vigorous things. At the same time, however, do not forget the distaff and the spindle; spin the thread of the small virtues and lower yourself into the practice of the exercises of charity. Whoever teaches the contrary, deceives and is deceived.”

In any case, this will not be entirely easy. To unite prayer with life, to behave in living as one behaves in praying, to manage to achieve the union of the heart and

of life, all this is not acquired by magic. One will have to be careful not to lose the inner balance required to advance without stumbling over obstacles. Let us do as tightrope walkers and acrobats do. "Those who walk on the rope always hold the counterweight pole in their hand, to balance the body exactly, according to the movements they have to make on such a dangerous base." Comparing the cross of Christ to the counterweight pole that guarantees balance, Francis de Sales reminds us that daily life is full of dangerous occasions and that it needs a safeguard.

The everyday transfigured

Daily life is punctuated by moments, but "in these moments of our life is enclosed, as in a kernel, the seed of eternity." The clock offers us the quantitative measure of time, but its quality depends on us. If we wish, we "can spend all our

years, our months, our days, and our hours, making them holy through a good and faithful use."

Alongside "great works," the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* tries to persuade us that it is important to take into consideration "minor and humbler" activities: "the small injuries, these small annoyances, these little losses that happen every day," the "small occasions," the "daily small gestures of charity," "these small inconveniences," "this small humiliation," "these small sufferings." Now, all this, all "these occasions that present themselves at every turn, are a great way, if one knows how to use them well, to amass many spiritual riches." The smallest of these moments can acquire an extraordinary value, if it is lived with love.

It often happens that a person weak in body and spirit, who exercises themselves only in small things, does them with so much charity as to far surpass the merit of great and lofty actions; for, usually, lofty actions are performed with less charity, on account of the attention and various considerations that are given to them.

During the last *Spiritual Conference* with the sisters of the Visitation of Lyon, two days before his death, he would repeat his favourite lesson: "It is not the accumulation of works that we do that makes us pleasing to God, but the love with which we perform them." Nor is it for the greatness of our actions that we please God: "A sister who in her cell is occupied with a little piece of work will acquire

greater merit than another busy with important affairs, but performed with less love. The perfection of our actions is given by love.”

The contemplative life is better, in itself, than the active life, but “if in the active life a more intimate union [with God] is achieved, it is better.” Therefore, “if a sister who works in the kitchen and handles the saucepan by the fire, does all this with greater love and charity than another, the material fire will not distract her, on the contrary, it will help her to be more pleasing to God.” Solitude with God is good, but it often happens “that one is as united to God in action as in solitude.”

Love is the secret of Salesian alchemy to the point that what afflicts us can take on an extraordinary value thanks to the union of our will with the good pleasure of God.¹