 Reading time: 5 min.

(continuation from previous article)

FOLLOWING AND SEEKING GOD'S WILL, IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (5/8)

This is the most popular theme in the writings of St Francis de Sales, the theme he returns to most often.

The discovery of God as a Provident Father and love for his will go hand in hand in Francis' life: he reminds us that "every day we ask him: Thy will be done, but when we actually have to do it, how difficult it is! We offer ourselves to God so often and say to Him each time: 'I am yours; here is my heart!' But, when He wants to make use of us, we are so neglectful! How can we say that we are His, if we do not want to conform to His holy will?"

"God's will must become the only thing to be sought and willed, never departing from it for any reason! Walk under the guidance of God's Providence, thinking only of the present day and leaving to Our Lord the heart you have given Him, never wanting to take it back for anything."

Francis de Sales teaches that following God's will is the best way to become a saint and this way is open to everyone. He writes:
"I intend to offer my teachings to those who live in the cities, in the family, at court, and who, by virtue of their status, are forced by social conveniences to live among others… A different exercise of devotion is required of each — the noble, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the maiden and the wife; and furthermore such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual."

What Francis of Sales calls devotion, Pope Francis calls holiness and writes words that seem to come straight from the pen of Francis of Sales:
"To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious. We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves."

In a letter, Francis de Sales wrote:
“For the love of God, abandon yourself entirely to His will and do not believe that you can serve Him in any other way, because we never serve Him well except when we serve Him as He wishes.”

This requires
“that we should not sow in our neighbour’s field, however beautiful it may be, until our own has been fully sown. Distraction of the heart which leads to having the heart in one place and duty in another is always very harmful.”

From time to time I hear this question asked:
“How do I understand what God’s will for me is?”

I found an answer in the life of the saint.
For more than six years Jane de Chantal waited before she could consecrate herself entirely to the Lord and found with Francis what would become the Order of the Visitation. Throughout this period, the Saint sought to understand what God’s will was in this regard. He himself tells us about it in a letter to Jane Frances:
“That great movement of spirit that led you as if by force and with great consolation; the long reflection that I imposed on myself before giving you my assent; the fact that neither you nor I trusted only in ourselves; the fact that we gave the first stirrings of your conscience all the time to calm down; the prayers, not of a day or two, but of several months, that preceded your choice, are infallible signs that allow us to affirm without a shadow of doubt that such was the will of God.”

This is a valuable testimony that highlights Francis’ prudence. He knew how to wait calmly, without renouncing all the means at his disposal to decipher God’s will for him and the Baroness. These also apply to us today: reflect long before the Lord, seek advice from wise people, do not make hasty decisions, pray a lot.
He gives Jane Frances her motivation:
“As long as God wants you to remain in the world out of love for Him, stay there willingly and joyfully. Many leave the world without leaving themselves and in this way seek what they like, their peace of mind and their satisfaction. We leave the world to serve God, to follow God and to love God. Since we aspire to nothing but his holy service, wherever we serve him we will always find ourselves content.”

Once God’s will is understood clearly enough, obedience is required, that is, putting

it into practice, living it!
He wrote in capital letters to the Baroness de Chantal: words that would be his entire life's programme and, I would say, sum up Francis' spirituality:

DO EVERYTHING OUT OF LOVE AND NOTHING OUT OF FEAR; LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN FEARING DISOBEDIENCE

To obey is to speak lovingly to God who calls me to live his will in the concrete circumstances of my life.

Obedience is the form that love takes
Here are the consequences of this surrender to God's will that Francis reminds so many people of with splendid images. To Madame Brûlart, a mother of a family, he writes:
"Everything we do receives its value from our conformity to God's will. We must love what God loves. Now he loves our vocation. So let us also love it and not waste time thinking about the vocation of others."

Progress is to be stressed and encouraged:
"You have said a wonderful word to me: let God place me where he wants; I don't care, as long as I can serve him. We must love this will of God and the obligation it presupposes in us, even if it is keeping pigs or doing the humblest acts throughout our lives, because, wherever the good God places us, we must not care. This is the goal of perfection."

And now some images: the garden.
"Do not sow your desires in someone else's garden, but just look after your own properly. Do not wish to be anything but what you are, and try to be that perfectly. This is the great secret and the least understood secret of the spiritual life. What is the use of building castles in Spain if we have to live in France? This is an old lesson of mine, and you understand it well."

The image of the boat.
"It seems to us that by changing boat we will be better off. Yes, we will be better off if we change ourselves! I am the sworn enemy of all those useless, dangerous and evil desires. For although **what** we desire is good, our desiring is bad, for God is not asking us for that thing, but for something else which he wants us to apply ourselves to."

The image of the child.
We need to entrust “our general purpose to divine Providence, abandoning ourselves in his arms, like the little child, who eats what his father gives him every day in order to grow, certain that he will always provide him with food in proportion to his appetite and needs.”

Francis insists on this point, which is fundamental:
“What does it matter to a soul that is truly in love, whether the heavenly Bridegroom is served in one way or another? He who seeks only the satisfaction of his Beloved is happy with whatever makes him happy!”

The following excerpt, written following one of Jane de Chantal’s serious illnesses, is a moving one:
“You are more precious to me than myself; but this does not prevent me from conforming fully to the divine will. We intend to serve God in this world with our whole being: whether he consider it better that we are one in this world and one in the other or both in the other, may his most holy will be done.”

To conclude, a few more lines from his letters:
“We want to serve God, but by following our will and not his. God declared that He does not like any sacrifice contrary to obedience. God commands me to serve souls and I want to remain in contemplation: the contemplative life is good, but not when it is in opposition to obedience. We cannot choose our duties ourselves: we must see what God wants; and if God wants me to serve him by doing one thing, I must not want to serve him by doing another.”
“If we are holy according to our own will, we will never be holy properly: we must be holy according to God’s will!”

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