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GENTLENESS IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (7/8)

Some episodes from Francis's life leads us to contemplate "Salesian gentleness".

In order to improve the situation of the clergy in the parishes, Francis had decided that at least three candidates for a parish would be named. The best would be chosen.

Now, it had happened that a Knight of Malta, furious because one of his servants had been excluded from the selection (this candidate knew more about courting women than commenting on the Gospel!) had abruptly entered the bishop's study and had insulted and threatened him, and Francis had remained standing, hat in hand. The bishop's brother then asked him if anger had ever taken hold of him at any time and the holy man did not hide from him that "then and often anger boiled in his brain like water boiling in a pot on the fire; but that by the grace of God, even if he had to die for having violently resisted this passion, he would never have said a word favour of it."

The first monastery was being built in the city (the *Sainte Source*) and work was not progressing because the Dominicans were protesting with the workers. According to them, there was not the required distance between the two buildings. The protests were lively and the bishop kindly and patiently rushed in to calm tempers. This calmness and gentleness did not please Jane de Chantal, who blurted:

"Your gentleness will only increase the insolence of these malicious people." "Not so, not so" Francis replied, "so, Mother, do you want me to destroy the inner peace I have been working on for more than eighteen years in just a quarter of an hour?"

There is an important premise for understanding what Salesian gentleness is. An expert, Salesian Fr Pietro Braido, tells us about it:

"It is not sentimentalism, which evokes mushy kinds of expressions; it is not the kindness that is typical of people who are happy to close their eyes to reality so as not to have problems and annoyances; it is not the short-sightedness of people who see everything beautiful and good and for whom everything is always fine; it is not the inert attitude of people who have no suggestions to offer... Salesian gentleness

(Don Bosco would use the term loving-kindness) is something else: it undoubtedly stems from a deep and solid charity and demands careful control of one's emotional and affective resources; it expresses itself in constant, serene humour, sign of someone with a rich humanity; it requires a capacity for empathy and dialogue and creates a serene atmosphere, free of tension and conflict. So Francis' gentleness is not to be confused with weakness; on the contrary, it is strength that requires control, goodness of mind, clarity of purpose and a strong presence of God."

But Francis was not born this way! Endowed with marked sensitivity, he was easy given to mood swings and outbursts of anger.

Lajeunie writes:

"Francis de Sales was a true Savoyard, habitually calm and gentle, but capable of terrible rages; a volcano beneath the snow. By nature he was very quick to anger, but committed himself daily to correction.

Given his lively and sanguine temperament, his habitual gentleness was often put to the test. He was much hurt by insolent and unpleasant words and vulgar gestures. In 1619 in Paris, he confessed that he still had outbursts of anger in his heart and had to rein it in with both hands! 'I made a pact with my tongue not to say a word when I was in a rage. By the grace of God I was able to have the strength to curb the passion of anger, to which I was naturally inclined.' It was by the grace of God that he had acquired the ability to master the angry passions to which his temper was prone. His gentleness was thus a strength, the fruit of a victory."

It is not difficult to discover the saint's personal experience in the following quotations, made up of patience, self-control, inner struggle ...

He said to one woman:

"Be very gentle and affable in the midst of the occupations you have, because everyone expects this good example from you. It is easy to steer the boat when it is not hindered by the winds; but in the midst of troubles, problems, it is difficult to remain serene, just as it is difficult to steer a course in the midst of gales."

To Madame de Valbonne, whom Francis described as "a pearl", he wrote:

"We must always remain steadfast in the practice of our two dear virtues: gentleness towards our neighbour and loving humility towards God."

We find the two virtues dear to the Heart of Jesus together: gentleness and humility.

It is necessary to practise gentleness **to self as well**.

"Whenever you find your heart without gentleness, content yourself with taking it

very gently in your fingertips to put it back in its place, and do not take it with closed fists or too abruptly. We must be willing to serve this heart in its illnesses and also to use some kindness in its regard; and we must bind our passions and inclinations with chains of gold, that is, with the chains of love.

“He who can maintain meekness amid pain and weariness, and peace amid worry and over-whelming cares, is well nigh perfect. Perfect evenness of temper, true gentleness and sweetness of heart, are more rare than perfect chastity, but they are so much the more to be cultivated. I commend them to you, my dearest daughter, because upon these, like the oil of a lamp, depends the flame of good example. Nothing is so edifying as a loving good temper.”

Francis reminded parents, educators, teachers, superiors in general to practise gentleness especially when it comes to making some **remark or reproaching** someone. Here the Salesian spirit emerges:

“Even when reprimanding them, as is necessary, one must use much love and gentleness with them. In this way, reprimands easily obtain some good results. Correction dictated by passion, even when it has a reasonable basis, is much less effective than that which comes solely from reason.”

“I assure you that every time I have resorted to sharp retorts, I have had to regret them. People do much more out of love and charity than out of severity and rigour.”

Gentleness goes hand in hand with another virtue: **patience**. Here, then, are a few letters recommending it:

“As long as we remain down here [on earth], we must resign ourselves to putting up with ourselves until God takes us to heaven. We must therefore be patient and never think that we can correct in a day the bad habits we have contracted because of the meagre care we have taken of our spiritual health [...]. We must, let us admit it, be patient with everyone, but first of all with ourselves.”

To Madame de Limonjon he wrote: “It is not possible to get to where you aspire to in one day: we must gain a point today, tomorrow another; and so, step by step, we will arrive at being masters of ourselves; and it will be no small victory.”

Patience, for Francis, is the first virtue to be put in place in building a solid spiritual edifice.

“The effect of patience is to possess one’s soul well, and patience is all the more perfect the more it is free from restlessness and haste.”

“Have patience with regard to your inner cross: the Saviour allows it so that, one day, you may better know who you are. Do you not see that the restlessness of the

day is calmed by the rest of the night? This means that our soul needs nothing more than to abandon itself completely to God and be willing to serve Him amidst roses as well as thorns.”

Here are two practical letters: to Madame de la Fléchère he wrote:

‘What do you want me to say about the return of your miseries, except that you must take up arms and courage again and fight more decisively than ever? You will have to use a lot of patience and resignation to get your affairs in order. God will bless your work.’

And to Madame de Travernay he said:

“You must know how to accept the annoyances that touch you in the course of the day with patience and gentleness, and for the love of Him who permits them. Therefore lift up your heart often to God, implore his help, and consider the good fortune you have to be his as the main foundation of your consolation!”

Finally, this text I call **the hymn to charity according to St Francis de Sales**.

“He who is gentle offends no one, bears willingly those who do him harm, suffers with patience the blows he receives, and does no evil for evil. He who is gentle never becomes upset, but conforms all his words to humility, overcoming evil with good. Always make corrections from the heart and with gentle words.

In this way corrections will produce better effects. Never resort to retaliation against those who have displeased you. Never resent or be angry for any reason, for that is always an imperfection.”

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