



DE SALES AND MERMIER RESOURCE AND ANIMATION CENTRE

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BULLETIN

Vol. 11 / MARCH 2020

Contents



Editorial

"Introduction to the
Devout Life":
A Spiritual Classic of
Saint Francis de Sales

A Circular of the Servant
of God, Fr. Peter Mary
Mermier,

Salesian Thought



MSFS

Holy Mary

Pray for us



Editorial

It will be very interesting to note at what context SFS wrote his spiritual classic "the Introduction to the Devout Life?". He makes it clear in the very Preface to his work; "...I cannot write, nor do I want to write, nor should I write in this "Introduction" anything else than what has been published already on this subject by our predecessors". For SFS only the presentation is different but the matter is same. But he writes those who have written about devotion had in mind the instruction of persons completely separated from life in the world. Francis makes his mind crystal-clear: "My purpose is to instruct people living in towns, the married, and those at princely courts. They are obliged by their state of life to lead an ordinary life to all outward appearances. Very often such persons do not want even to think of venturing on the devout life, finding an excuse in the false claim that it is impossible".

Another major reason of the publication of "The Introduction to the Devout life" is the request of a respectful and virtuous lady (Madam Louise de Charmoisy) to lead her to devout life. The instructions he gave to Madam de Charmoisy was noted by another devout religious (Fr. Jean Fourier, SJ) who found out the precious treasure that should be published.

To his readers, SFS says, "I am writing about the devout life without being devout myself. But I certainly want to be devout and it is this very desire that encourages me to give you instruction". We find the originality of his thoughts and the sincere confession of his desire to become devout which gave shape to "The Introduction to the Devout Life".

Fr. Joseph Thazhathukunnel msfs

“INTRODUCTION TO THE DEVOUT LIFE”: A Spiritual Classic of Saint Francis de Sales

The spiritual classic of St. Francis de Sales, “Introduction the devout life” which Francis de Sales called as “poor little book” responds and continues to respond to the fundamental religious desire of the human heart.

“PHILOTHEA:”

He calls the reader as “Philothea” which means the “Christian soul” who is still waiting at the gate and Francis is going to try to help her penetrate, step by step, the Christianity to which she aspires. Philothea is instructed in her religion, she knows her catechism, and she practices her duties, but between her life and her faith there is more or less the distance that separates life and death.



What is devotion?

Devotion is one of the most sacred words in spiritual language, but it must be recognized – it is also one of the most insipid and one of the most boring in contemporary language. Perhaps it was a less so in the time of SFS. He admits in the very first pages of the “Introduction..”: “The world vilifies holy devotion as much as it can. It pictures devout persons as having discontented, gloomy, sullen faces and claims that devotion brings on depression and unbearable moods”. It is true that each author and even each christian, lists under this same word some very diverse ways of practicing devotion. Many spiritual authors have written about devotion in view of instructing persons wholly withdrawn from the world or have at least taught a kind of devotion that leads to such complete retirement. But SFS purpose is to instruct those who live in town, within families, or at court and by their state of life are obliged to live an ordinary life as to outward appearances. Frequently on the pretext of some supposed impossibility, they will not even think of undertaking a devout life.

It is not therefore, condition, profession, or age that opens the way to the devout life. It is the interior call, the “Desire” to “aspire to the love of God”. And God addresses this call to all Christain and even to all men and women. This call is universal; it comes from the foundation of the Gospel: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself, for the love of God”

What is devout life?

In the first three chapters of “the Introduction to the Devout Life” Francis describes “devotion” carefully. Because it is important to be precise about the goal and to

define clearly this life to which he “tends and intends” to introduce Philothea, “it is essential that we know what the virtue of devotion is, inasmuch as there is only one true devotion, but a quantity of false and vain devotions”

Here is the illuminating text: “True and living devotion presupposes the love of God; it is nothing other than true love of God”. This is a capital declaration that immediately separates all the adulterated and dangerous forms of devotion. When, then, can we call the love of God devotion? Answer: “When it has reached that degree of perfection whereby it not only makes us do well, but it makes us do so carefully, frequently, and promptly”. Notice the three adverbs: they recur unceasingly under the pen of Francis de Sales in order to qualify devotion. They are even enriched with synonyms: “quickly.... openly.... affectionately ... actively.... diligently”.

In short, devotion is a certain “style” a way of practicing the love of God and the love of neighbor: “Devotion is nothing other than a spiritual agility and vivacity by means of which charity effect its activity in us, or we through it, promptly and affectionately”. “Devotion is the contrary of “devotions”. Just as it pertains to charity to enable us generously and universally to practice all the commandments of God, it pertains to devotion to enable us to do so promptly and diligently”. Devotion provokes us to do promptly and gladly as many good works as we can, even when they are in no way commanded but only counseled or inspired. And in order not to mislead us, Francis sums up his thoughts thus: “Charity and devotion are no more different from one another than flame is from fire, inasmuch as charity – being a spiritual life – when it is greatly inflamed is called “devotion”. Thus devotion adds nothing to the fire of charity except the flame that renders charity prompt, active and diligent, not only as to the observance of the commandments of God but also as to the exercise of the heavenly counsels and inspirations”. Francis could be still more precise: “If charity is a plant, devotion is its flower, if charity is a costly gem, devotion is its luster, if charity is a precious balm, devotion is its perfume”.

There is nothing less abstract or formal than devotion. Like charity, it varies for everyone “according to his occupation and vocation”. “Devotion ought to be practiced differently by the gentleman, by the artisan, by the valet, by the prince, by the widow, by the young girl, by the married woman... and not only that, but it is important to accommodate the practice of devotion to the strength, affairs and duties of each individual.... Devotion spoils nothing when it is true, but it perfects everything”. It is forever and everywhere. “It is an error – indeed a heresy – to want to banish the devout life from the company of soldiers, from the shop of artisans from the court of princes, from the household of married people... Wherever we may be, we ought to aspire to the perfect life.” In 1609 Francis wrote to his friend des Hayes that he had written this book “always having in mind the people who live amid the pressures of the world”.

Existing spiritualities of those days:

As early as 1580 four great spiritual currents were proposed to souls desirous of loving God: a) one insisted that one could not attain true devotion except by renouncing the world and shutting oneself in a cloister. b) a second was that of the “easy devotion” inspired by the “wisdom” of the humanist Pierre Charron. c) a third came from the Rhenish-Flemish mystics, and it reserved the love of God for a contemplative elite. (Francis de Sales knew this firsthand in 1602 as a member of the Acarie circle). d) Happily, for the “great number” another current was formulated a few years previously: it came from Spain and Italy. Among the representatives, two, above all, won Francis’ preference: Luis de Granada (*The Guide for Sinners* and the *Memoirs of the Christian life*) and the Theatine Lorenzo Scupoli (*The Spiritual Combat*).

Gerson in France had from the beginning of the fifteenth century inclined toward spirituality in the sense of a “universal devotion”. His celebrated cry “*Monachatus non est pietas*” (Devotion is not the prerogative of the monk) became proverbial. Francis de Sales was very well acquainted with these tendencies of spirituality, but he had several times carried out the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, during which he had heard “the universal call” that Jesus Christ launched in the gospel to all men, and he knew that the most humble souls could give to this appeal the response of “the distinguished”, namely, those who threw themselves resolutely, generously, joyously into following the Lord Jesus and who wished “to distinguish themselves in his service”. Devotion – such as Francis de Sales intended it – was born of his personal experience and of the confidences of his Philotheas.

The Genesis of Devout Life according to St. Francis de Sales:

Francis tells in his Preface of the “*Introduction to the Devout Life*”: “I have divided this *Introduction* into five parts, in the first of which I attempt... to convert Philothea’s simple desire into a total resolution, which she does after her general confession, by a solid protestation, followed by a most Holy Communion in which, giving herself to her Savior and receiving him, she enters happily into his holy love. This done – in order to lead her still more forward – I show her two great methods of uniting herself closer and closer to the Divine Majesty: the use of the sacraments, through which the good God comes to us, and holy prayer, through which he draws us to himself, and in this I employ the second part. In the third, I make her see how she must practice certain virtues more pertinent to her advancement... In the fourth, I make her discover a few of her enemies’ ambushes, and I show her how she must be dedicated to extricating herself from them so as to pass onward. Finally, in the fifth part, I make her withdrawn a little from herself in order to refresh herself, catch her breath, and renew her strength so that she may afterward reach her goal more happily and advance in the devout life”.

The outstanding characteristics of Salesian Devotion:

For Francis de Sales the baptismal commitment is the most decisive factor in the itinerary of devotion. It is a very “solid protestation” to make courageous steps towards devotion. Realizing the gravity of this determination Francis makes explicit reference to it: “I avow a second time and I renew the sacred profession of fidelity made in my behalf to my God at my baptism, renouncing the devil, the world and the flesh... converting myself to God I desire, propose, determine and resolve irrevocably to serve him and love him now and eternally”.

Francis did not separate the union of life with God from baptism, a union that is realized in the light, more or less “foreshadowed by faith”, and of which the Eucharist is the sign and the nourishment. In the Eucharist one gives oneself to the Savior and one receives him. Francis calls the Eucharist “the most holy, sacred and most sovereign Sacrifice and sacrament of the Mass” is “the sun of the spiritual exercises, the center of the Christian religion, the heart of devotion, the soul of piety. It is the ineffable mystery that encompasses the abyss of divine charity, and through which God – really applying himself to us – magnificently communicates to us his gifts and favors”. These words of Francis show his deep appreciation of the Eucharist which is highly recommended by the Vatican II in its Decree on “Sacrosanctum Concilium, 10. Thus for Francis de Sales, Eucharist is the heart of devotion.

Another characteristic of the Introduction to the Devout Life is that it is bathed in an atmosphere of spiritual liberty. Francis de Sales introduces Philothea to the liberty of the heart of the children of God. Thus, for example, when it is a question of prayer: to him who objects that Francis’s counsels presupposes that Philothea has the gift of prayer, and that this gift – as experience proves – is not dispensed to each and every one, he replies: “Almost everyone can have it, even the most ignorant, provided they have good directors and that they are willing to work to acquire it, as much as it deserves. And if one finds that he does not have this gift to any degree... the wise spiritual father will easily help him make up for the lack: liturgical prayer, ejaculatory prayer, attentive spiritual reading, even “sighs” are there in order to relieve the difficulty of meditation”.

It was not Francis intention to substitute monastic and contemplative life for the laity by way of following a devout life. Francis asks Philothea to be present to the world, to her family, to her relations, to others, not only as if –but better than if–she was not devout. Salesian devotion transfigures life; it does not mutilate it. It is according to Mother de Chaugy “a well-mannered devotion”. Baroness de Chantal’s servants gave a happy account of this: “Madame’s first spiritual guide made her pray only three times a day, and we were all annoyed by it, but the Bishop of Geneva makes her pray at all hours of the day, and this disturbs no one”.

Francis' extraordinary love for the poor:

Francis recommends Philothea the practice of poverty. He says "always leave some portion of your means by giving it to the poor with a good heart". Better still: "Love the poor and love poverty, because by this love you will become truly poor... Love equalizes the lovers". And let this love be true. "Go frequently among the poor; take pleasure in seeing them in your home and in visiting them in their homes. Converse with them willingly; be much at ease, so that they may approach you in the churches, in the streets, and elsewhere. Be poor in your language with them, speaking to them like their companion". Francis asks Philothea further: "Do you wish to do still more, Philothea? Do not be content to be like the poor, but be poorer than the poor". And how is that done? The servant is less than his master, therefore, make yourself the servant of the poor; go to serve them in their beds when they are sick, I say with your own hands; be their cook, and at your own expense; be their seamstress and their laundress".

Let Philothea profit from the thousand little occasions when she is lacking something useful or necessary. "Be glad for these opportunities; accept them with a good heart; suffer them gladly". And above all, if "some inconveniences occur that impoverish her either from much or little storms, fires, floods, lawsuits... "Oh, then you have the true season for practicing poverty, receiving with gentleness these losses of money, and adjusting yourself patiently and constantly to this impoverishment"

Francis further says: "It may happen that this "diminution of money" goes as far as real poverty. "If you are really poor, Philothea, be so even in spirit... You are in good company: Our Lord, Our Lady, the Apostles... were all poor... Embrace it, therefore, as the dear friend of Jesus Christ who was born, lived, and died in poverty". Inasmuch as this poverty "despised, rejected, reproached, and abandoned" among the worldly, it is "truly poverty". This is a typical example of the way in which Francis makes Philothea walk on the paths of devotion. Or rather, he does not lead her; he teaches her to guide herself according to the way God leads her. He teaches her to interpret and transfigure according to the spirit of the Gospel all that she encounters: joys and trials. "Be what we receive purely from the will of God is always very agreeable to hi, provided that we receive it with a good heart and for the love of his holy will: where there is less of ourselves, there is more of God".

How come Francis to this notion of poverty? For Francis the Philothea should have the spirit and the force of the Gospel. For him a great principle dominates human existence: God has his gaze on each of us – what he calls a "Providence" – and at each moment, in each situation, he helps the soul to acquiesce to his "tenderly paternal" will.

(This article is extracted from Andre Ravier, "St. Francis de Sales: sage and saint" Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1988, pp. 73-76)

A Circular of the Servant of God,
**Fr. Peter Mary Mermier, Founder and the First Superior General of the
Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales**

(Three priests just left the Congregation. On this occasion, the Superior sends a circular to the Missionaries in India: 3rd July 1852)



I wish to discuss with you about what touches us very intimately. As it is not possible to do it with each one of you in person, at least with some details, I shall content myself with writing this small circular, which is meant for all. I take the subject:

To love and esteem which we should have for our Congregation

Here is the occasion:

Defections: Besides death which takes Confreres away from us, still we have just lost several who have left our Congregation: First Abbe Floret since some time; since some weeks Abbe Moret and Abbe Peccou, all excellent confreres, I could say, friends. But under the pretext of health, or vocation or for other reasons they decided to leave. Speaking in general, without making any direct application to these confreres, the lack of vocation, of health are (the cited) reasons for some to leave. Rather I am afraid that there is lack of zeal for one's own sanctification and, lack of love and esteem for the consecrated life and especially for the Congregation.

Seriousness of our Vocation:

On the one hand, the priests have to understand above all the vocation, the holiness and the dignity of the priests, the greatness, the tremendous elevation of the priesthood. On the other, they are to be aware of the dangers to which they are exposed, the difficulties they have to overcome, their responsibility and the account they have to render (to God). Add to it the sad experiences of a great number of the diocesan clergy: what a subject of reflection and what serious motives to take precautions for oneself both for the peace of one's own conscience as well as for the success of one's ministry.

Now the means, the secure harbor, is consecrated life, the community life of a religious congregation. There, surely, we are less in the world, less in contact with the world, less given over to the world. There we do not have the great concern and embarrassment of housekeeping and of temporal affairs. There, at least partially, we are freed from the solicitations of parents and relatives; there we are less isolated, less abandoned to oneself. All this is quite true. It is evident, but we do not reflect or

forsee at all. We think of the current difficulty (lit. inconvenience of the moment). We wish to live according to our freedom and lead a life which gratifies our senses.

Surprising lightheadedness:

It is something surprising. There are persons who have made long considerations and serious self-examination to discover that they were called to the consecrated life. But when it is about returning to the world, to expose them to all sorts of scandals, they go merely by the whims of the moment, they have no need of advice.

Can we deal with the most important matter of salvation, vocation, with so much rashness? There are some simple ignorant girls among the villagers, playing of their imaginations and there are young men who offer them to become Brothers who thus endanger their vocation. I am less surprised. I have examples from both sides.

But how can priests who know everything, who are teachers in Israel be tempted to treat so lightly a matter so serious as one's vocation! How to understand them? Would they be so imprudent if it concerns the vocation of another? I agree without doubt, all are not called to the consecrated life, to a life in community to constant renunciation, to this life of sacrifice.

But there are persons who have consulted, tried and believed themselves to be called. It is not a duty for them before changing the side to examine, to consult, to act with prudence so that they do not subject the institution from which they go out, as also their own good reputation to slanders and calumnies of the world which is always ready to censure religious vocation on such occasions.

No, those who go out thus without examining themselves, have not reflected on the advantages of consecrated life. In it (a religious) lives more purely for the Lord, falls more rarely, rises more quickly, walks more cautiously, prays more frequently, rest more securely, dies more confidently, is purified more speedily, and is rewarded more abundantly (St. Bernard). After all, they should understand that there should be quite serious reasons, not to speak of the obstacle arising from the vows, to change their vocation. They forget the motives which made them decided (in favor of their vocation) the first time. They do not examine the reasons which could be lawful before God and before men for changing their decision.

Leaving for valid reasons:

You do not forget that I continue to speak of those who leave on their own, without any clear reason and without the advice of their Superiors. For if there were no instances of (persons) with no vocation, even for those who would offer themselves and who would have even entered a congregation, why a long novitiate? Why among us the vow of temporary stability: which I would call the vow of waiting and test.

Those who leave due to valid reasons, during this time of trial, follow the order of things. They seek the will of God, walk in the path which the Rule of the Congregation prescribes for them.

I experience sorrow at the departure of good confreres; these departures cause an emptiness in our ranks. In spite of it, seeing our manifold activities, I declare to you that I am happy. We should rejoice due to our love and esteem for our little Congregation which purifies itself by rejecting the elements which do not suit it. Moreover, I hope with confidence that these losses would be real profits and the same providence which designs to withdraw them would replace them with greater advantage.

Love of the Congregation:

Yes, my dear Confreres, our Congregation is good, worthy of our esteem and of our love. The goal it proposes, the means it takes to attain it are great and high. Its Rules and Constitutions deserve our confidence.

You, dear missionaries, you have left everything to bind yourself irrevocably to this dear Congregation by all the bonds it has. So you love it as your unique (treasure). I have found whom my soul loves. You love it, you appreciate it, and you say with your heart and soul: Zion, you are my rest. I will dwell here because I have chosen it. The Congregation is everything for you and would be your joy and your consolation in your exile. I have all the proofs of it which I can reasonably desire. I bless and thank the divine goodness for it.

You may tell me: Why do you preach penance to those who are converts? Why to recommend to us love and esteem for our Congregation which we have chosen? We entered it only because we love it and we prefer it above all others. We take shelter under its protection like little chicks under the wings of their mother.

You may still say: Is there not some danger in informing us of these defections? Is it not a kind of scandal, to think that at least some of those who leave thus, do so without serious reasons?

I admit that I have already made these remarks. Though they are reasonable and likely to be true, I thought that I should continue. We know better good as well as evil from their opposites. It is necessary that scandals arise and that there are heresies. Seeing the defection of others, the true elect learn and feel better the love and esteem they should have for the Congregation.

A call to fervor:

To explain my whole thought to you, I would remind you of what I said at least to

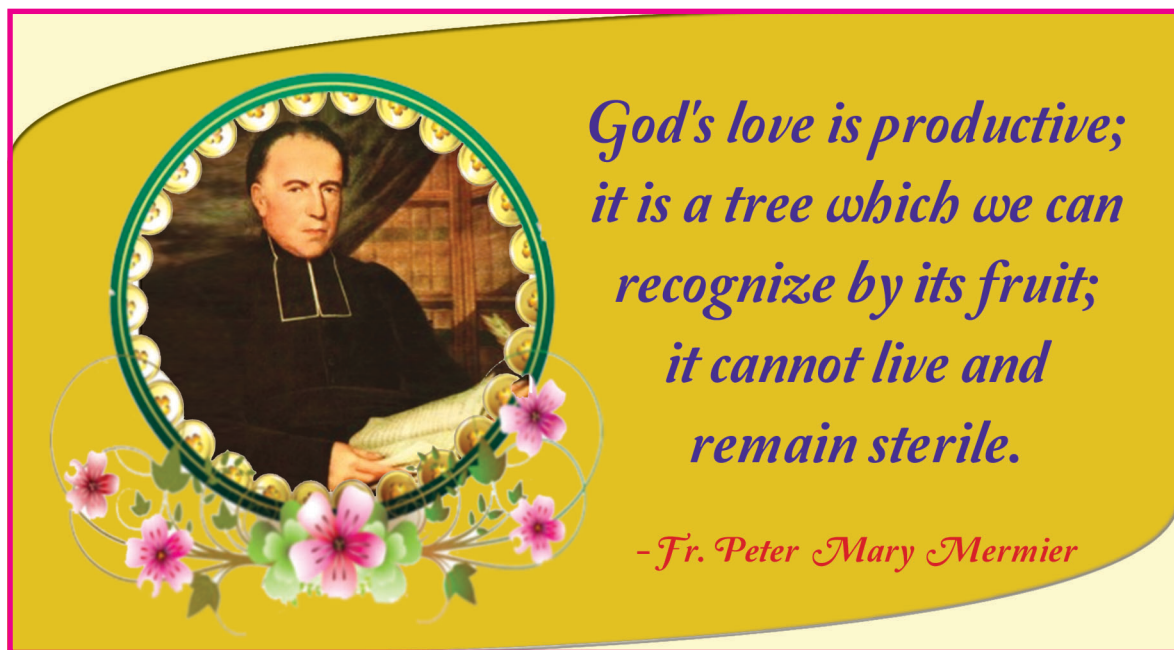
some of you while you were here in Savoy. We are far from the goal, which our Congregation proposes. We are striving towards it etc. Perhaps several of you might have been scandalized or at least unedified, before their departure to see the difference that was there between our existing Rules and the behavior of some of ours.

Today thanks be to God, we are beginning to be better. Your prayers, your letters, your examples have effectively contributed to it. This is my conviction. Those who opt to withdraw themselves (from the Congregation), all those who are not aware of a well-committed vocation for the whole-hearted practice of these Holy Rules, put us more and more at ease as regards direction. May God be blessed and thanked forever. It is His work. It is done by the Lord.

As for me, I do not dare to hope for it, that as is done at La Feuillette so it is done at Visakhapatnam. The Missionaries and the Brothers will be fervent, regular. Today, it is absolutely necessary, probably more than ever. Seeing the evils, it is not ordinary remedies that are necessary. What conclusion are we to draw from it? May God help us. May St. Francis de Sales protect us. May Our Lady of Compassion deign to look at her children. We will always fare better.

(An Observation: Fr. A Dual, the editor of the original text observes that there are three drafts of this circular and the end of the text is unreadable, the bottom of the page being very much damaged)

(Edited from the selected Letters of Fr. Peter Mermier, A. Dual, MSFS).



Salesian Thought

We ought to hope
in the midst of trails,
and fear in the midst of
prosperity; in either situation
we must remain humble.

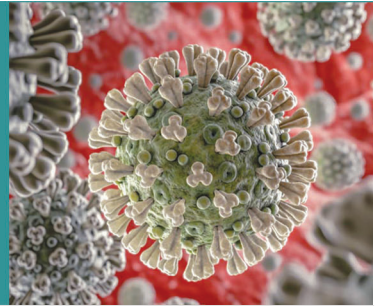
— St. Francis de Sales



Dear Confreres, Brothers & Sisters

In this challenging times of Covid-19,
let us **TAKE CARE,**
MAINTAIN DISTANCE & KEEP SAFE.

May God Bless us.



DSM Bulletin is your bulletin. We need your comments, observations,
suggestions for its improvement. Write in short to the editors at the earliest.

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