

## “Cordiality as a Salesian Approach to Healing Relationships”

by

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### INTRODUCTION

Relationships ... We all have them. We all need them. We all want them. We know how beneficial they are. Yet, at one time or another, we have all suffered because of them, through our own fault or that of the other.

Relationships are central to who we are and who we are to become. In fact, they matter so much that our Christian faith is grounded in a relationship. God entered into one with us personally – in the Nativity – in order to redeem and save our relationship eternally – through the Paschal Mystery. Indeed, the divine forging of relationship is what sweeps across the arc of all time: the One who created us did so out of a relationship of Trinitarian love and did so for the purpose of uniting us in a relationship with that Trinity forever.

Our creation from and for a relationship of love frames the worldview of Salesian Spirituality, an approach to human flourishing that is fundamentally relational in nature and in scope. In the visionary thought of St. Francis de Sales, we live in *a world of interconnected hearts* – an image that WENDY WRIGHT explains so well:

For the Savoyard bishop all human hearts were created to beat in rhythm with their Creator’s dynamic, creative, and generative heart. Because human hearts are created by God who is goodness and love itself, they too are essentially good and always retain their original orientation to love. Yet as they are wounded by sin, human hearts are, as it were, arrhythmic and must be restored to their intended pulse by “living Jesus.” They do this through the mediation of the one heart that is both fully human and fully divine. The heart of Jesus thus must be exchanged for human hearts.<sup>2</sup>

“Living Jesus” is what we are invited to do in all our relationships. With a wisdom born of his own experience and set forth for us in his timeless teaching, St. Francis de Sales offers a particular perspective on how people can do this in contemporary situations. The foundation to this Salesian view can be found in the saint’s profound conversion of experience, during his time as a student in Paris. There, at the feet of the Black Madonna, he received the relational gift that would last a lifetime. Radiating from that experience, in terms of the saint’s example and teaching, is an emphasis on a “little virtue” whose four aspects offer a distinctly Salesian response to healing the various relationships people have in this world.

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## The FOUNDATION

The Salesian call to “Live + Jesus” is more than a motto, more than a catchphrase for a desirable code of conduct. To “Live + Jesus” is to enter into the gift-response dynamic at the very core of the Christian life. In *Jesus*, the divine will bringing about Creation, the Incarnation, and the Paschal Mystery is the gift; our choice to *live* in faith and hope and charity is the response.

A young ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) endeavored to understand this fundamental religious relationship, particularly when he sought to grasp what it really meant in and for his own life. That youthful endeavor takes us back to his days as a student in sixteenth-century Paris and the conversion experience that would impact him there and then and for the rest of his life.

### *Francis de Sales in Paris (1578-1588)*<sup>3</sup>

At that time, Francis de Sales has not been acclaimed a Saint or Doctor of the Church. He is but a teenager, a young lad who had left his quaint village home years before, at age twelve, in the quest for an education that would prepare him for a noble life. That would happen, but in ways that neither he nor his parents could ever imagine.

Life at the court of high society in Paris was everything that could be imagined! For young people there, the big city presented a throng of new and sometimes wild experiences, as they learned to “sing the pleasures of drinking, hunting, and loving.”<sup>4</sup> Surely, Francis’s mother did not bring him up to live that way! But, as we know all too well even today, our environment impacts all our relationships, for better or worse.

As a still young soul in Paris, Francis de Sales was not yet spiritually mature. His own temperament was prone to flashes of anger, and his growing self-awareness must have included the real experience of facing temptations and dealing with the weaknesses of the flesh that affect every young man. To control himself, he likely took refuge in the pious exercises he learned at home and in the penitential disciplines he imposed upon himself. But it did not seem to help. The gnawing reality of his own humanness would not give way to his craving for holiness. How disillusioned, even scandalized, he must have felt!

Influenced by the enchanting world around him, and enticed by the emerging passions within him, Francis de Sales sought guidance in the surety of his faith, as taught by the Church. But in Paris, even this became a source of conflict for him. Taking in some theological lectures at the Sorbonne, he sat through raging disputations on the theory of pre-destination in which, it seemed, even Catholic thinkers claimed that God was free to decide who among us was to suffer the pangs of eternal damnation. Yet there he also learned the poetry of the Canticle of Canticles, with its biblical portrayal of God as joining with humanity in the historical unfolding of the eternal story of love. How confused young Francis must have been!

With that, we come to the low point in Francis’s life, a point at which his most cherished relationship – the one he had and sought with God – seems to be in jeopardy. He, himself, admits becoming convinced, in mind and heart and soul, that he was among the number destined for hell.

Fixated somewhat obsessively on the idea "of being for all eternity the enemy of God,"<sup>5</sup> the young man of God was unable to eat or to sleep with any regularity.

We know what happened next. One day he stopped at the Church of St. Etienne-des-grès. There, kneeling in desperate prayer before the statue of the Black Madonna, *Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance*, he spoke thus:

Whatever may happen, O God, you who hold all things in your hand, whose ways are *justice and truth*, whatsoever you may have decreed concerning me in the eternal secret of your predestination and reprobation, you whose judgments are unfathomable, you who are ever Just Judge and Merciful Father, I will love you always, O Lord, at least in this life! At least in this life will I love you, if it is not given me to love you in eternity!<sup>6</sup>

Then he dutifully recited the "Memorare" in its entirety. And when he finished praying, the crisis was over, the despair had passed, the obsession had subsided. As St. Jane de Chantal recounts the moment, "His troubles, so it seemed to him, had fallen about his feet like a leper's scales."<sup>7</sup>

#### *Francis's "conversion"*

Whatever its exact cause, the crisis in Paris would prove to be a spiritual conversion for Francis. It awakened in him a profound awareness of the generosity of God. It made real for him what St. Paul writes about the grace of God, that "In (Jesus) and through his blood, we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God's favor to us" (Eph 1:7). It sealed him with a new Spirit, such that he would now take hold of his relationship with God and never let go (cf. Cantic of Canticles 3:4).

His prayer of abandonment reflects and reveals the change within him. No longer would he pursue his relationship with God by way of emotional fervor or pious devotion or intellectual acumen (though he possessed all three). Rather, he learned to overcome "his 'saintly craving' for God by transcending it completely."<sup>8</sup>

As a result, he also changed his perspective on worldly relationships. He knows now that God's love for human beings, personally and not just conceptually, surpasses the transitory ups and downs of our existence. Based on his experience, Francis forms a thoroughly hopeful worldview that would inform all his relationships and all his works. He would live by and teach an optimism that exalted the goodness of life not as a result of human accomplishment, or even the worthiness of human nature, but as the very real effect of a true understanding of divine mercy.

In that fundamental optimism born of his spiritual experience is found the firm foundation for healing relationships. *We let it begin with God*, whose generous mercy toward us and gracious love for us give us the wherewithal to approach our relationships in an entirely new way.

We can also *let it begin with St. Francis de Sales*. His mind and heart and soul were healed in Paris by abandoning himself entirely to the God revealed in Sacred Scripture, and particularly by the

Sacred Heart of Jesus. In turn, he teaches us to “Live + Jesus” by radiating a similar cordiality in all our relationships.

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## The RADIATION

From this foundation in Francis de Sales’s spiritual conversion radiates a distinctly Salesian approach to human relationships, characterized by “cordiality.” This refers to a habit of the devout life, a little virtue that we can and should cultivate in order to “Live Jesus,” and not merely a personality trait with which someone may or may not be endowed.

Arising from the generosity of God’s love, embodied for us in the Sacred Heart of Jesus,<sup>9</sup> cordiality here refers both to a disposition and an action toward others. It is a *thinking from and living by the heart*. In the tradition of Salesian spirituality, the heart is understood not as a center of emotion but as the core of being human; as Father André Brix describes it, St. Francis de Sales saw the heart as “the human being taken integrally, body and soul, in an indissociable unity.” The heart, in this sense, “is also the deepest ‘me’ and our mask, or better our ‘person’ who, by (way of ) the heart, is known and recognized.”<sup>10</sup>

Cordiality is the virtue that expresses the convictions of our heart. As such, it gives shape to the way we approach every relationship and offers a key to how we can heal relationships, as well. This we can explain by way of four instances in Francis’s life and teaching in which this distinctly Salesian virtue comes into play, each of which can be characterized by a particular aspect of cordiality that we could practice in our own relationships.

### *(1) Cordiality as Niceness - The Rule of Padua*

The first instance goes back to the beginning. Relationships have to start somewhere. The first moment of encountering another person is critical to what may later develop into a relationship. Common wisdom, with some science behind it, claims that a first impression is formed in just seven seconds! And logic dictates that we do not get a second chance to make a first impression.

The “gentleman saint” knew this well. Keenly aware of human psychology, really a humanistic anthropology, he understood that inner dispositions make themselves known outwardly in and through the way we encounter other people.

And so, not long after his stay in Paris, Francis de Sales penned for himself a set of spiritual exercises – commonly known as the “Rule of Padua”<sup>11</sup> – that included a code to guide his conduct with others. Moved by his own experience of the generosity of God in his regard, he determined to engage with others in a way that reflected a generous disposition toward them. Here is the rule as he puts it:

I will never disdain meeting any person, no matter who they may be, nor will I show any sign of wishing to avoid them, for this earns one the reputation of being proud, haughty, unfeeling, arrogant,

snobbish, ambitious, and manipulative. ... Above all, I will be careful neither to criticize, nor to mock, nor to be sarcastic to, anyone. It is a sign of stupidity to make fun of those who have no reason to put up with such treatment. I will show great respect for all ...

This exercise in making a first impression shows that Francis understood how heartfelt disdain or uncharitable speech can harm any potential relationship before it even has a chance to develop. For this reason, he chooses to “show great respect” at the very outset – a choice that radiates from his own heart rather than from any knowledge of the other person, whom he has not yet met. If a healthy relationship is to develop, it will begin with cordiality as its first principle.

Showing that same cordiality – that heartfelt respect for the other in attitude and in action -- is something any of us can do to initiate and sustain a relationship. We can, if we so choose, make our first encounter with others an experience of niceness rather than nastiness. How we acknowledge others, whether and how we speak to them, even non-verbally, and what we think of them in those first seven seconds -- all of that depends more on us than on them. We all have the ability to choose to be cordial or not.

When it comes to healing relationships subsequently harmed for whatever reason, that same phenomenon of niceness can still characterize our interactions. It may first require an apology, if the hurt came from me, so that we can start over with the impression-making process.<sup>12</sup> But whether giving or receiving an apology, and even without one, we are always free to choose the way of cordiality, of simply being nice to someone else.

### *(2) Cordiality as Pleasantness - The Chablais Method*

Even with a cordial start (or re-start), growing in relationships does not depend entirely on one person. An other is equally involved. And wherever two or three are gathered, argument ensues! Unfortunately, disagreement today often degenerates into disagreeableness.

Nevertheless, even a relationship marked by discord can be healed with cordiality, understood in this second instance as intentional pleasantness. Pleasantness, in this sense, does not simply mean being cheerful; a merry mode of interacting will not, on its own, magically remove all disagreement.

For St. Francis de Sales, choosing deliberately to be pleasant to others is something within our power. That affability radiates from the heart and can act like a balm to soothe a potentially disagreeable relationship. As a virtue, this form of cordiality mediates between an excessive seriousness that can appear impersonable and an affectatious flattery that can come off as annoyingly fake.<sup>13</sup>

The potential that pleasantness holds for healing relationships is, perhaps, most clearly demonstrated in the “spirit” and “method” with which St. Francis de Sales undertook his mission to the Chablais region.<sup>14</sup> In that missionary work, in a land subjected to religious heresy and

political persecution, he deliberately chose to approach his religious opponents with cordiality, as several Salesian scholars have affirmed:

André Ravier notes that he “treated with respect and charity those Protestants who kept away from him, who sometimes insulted him or assailed him, and above all he took them seriously.”

Elisabeth Stopp points out how “He never talks down to [the elders], never attacks them personally, addressing them as ‘separated brothers,’ an unheard of courtesy in that age of fierce polemics.”

Wendy Wright claims that “His respectful methods were based on a real affirmation of the intrinsic dignity and worth of each particular person, who is to be revered as such, even when – perhaps most when – the ideas they hold or the affiliations that claim them make them an ‘enemy’.”

Acting in this way can be quite challenging, because it goes against our natural inclination to self-defense. Yet it remains the Christian mission. Being pleasant to others, and doing so deliberately as a step toward healing relationships, is a choice we can make – a choice to affirm the personhood of the other over and above our differences, a choice radiating our own hearts, which have been affirmed and redeemed by the transcendent grace and generosity of God.

#### *Cordiality as Neighborliness - Assuming the Best in Everyone*

Even amid close and familiar relationships, like those of friends or siblings or even spouses, conflicts arise. One, in particular, is often caused by a single word – the “should” word, as when we believe that the other person in the relationship should (or should not) think or say or do what she thought or said or did.

It is a common malady in many relationships -- the failure to live up to expectations. We place them on others, just as they place them on us. But rarely are those expectations fulfilled to anyone’s satisfaction. When what happens is not as we think it should be, and when we ascribe responsibility for that defect to the other, we find ourselves in a jam.

In his many dealings with people, and in his writings about dealing with people, St. Francis de Sales often encountered the “should” problem. He saw it as a problem of judgment. The healing he proposes in this third instance brings us to another dimension of cordiality, which shows itself in neighborliness.

Neighbors are those who are “near” to us, whether geographically or spiritually. To be neighborly is to relate to an other in such a way that he or she is close by, is “one of our own,” a kindred spirit or fellow traveler. The command to “love your neighbor” means to be good to, and to do good by, those journeying through life with you.

For St. Francis de Sales, fulfilling that command begins with not making the kind of judgments that follow from the “should” word, the ultimately self-centered reasoning that thinks we know not only what is right for ourselves but what is right for others, too. “Can we never pass judgment on our neighbor? No, never,” the saint writes in the *Introduction to the Devout Life* (in part III, chapter 28), for “It is (a) rash judgment to draw a conclusion from an action in order to condemn the person.”

In his devotional classic, he also offers some insightful yet challenging ways to think of others in a neighborly fashion. For example, “If an action has many different aspects,” he advises that “we must always think of (the one) which is the best.” And, if an action is such that we cannot explain the fact of it or the intention behind it, he exhorts us to “at least make it worthy of compassion by attributing the most favorable cause we can to it, such as ignorance or weakness.”

That is cordiality at work, thinking from the heart more so than from the head. It is neighborliness to look upon others in a way that acknowledges who they actually are, rather than demanding that they “should” be different. It is how acquaintances learn to become friends. It is how spouses can consent to life with each other “for better or worse.” Ultimately, it is how our merciful God looks upon each of us.

#### *Cordiality as Meekness - A Gentle Force for the World*

Sadly, the love of neighbor seems to be in short supply these days. We know all too well the deadly violence that pervades our cities, our country, and our world. We see the discord, rancor, and even hatred that spews forth so easily on social media. We even witness division in the Church, where the outrage to which society seems to be addicted has created a narrative of “us vs. them” and risks turning the Church militant into the Church belligerent, as Father Paul Scalia cleverly describes it.<sup>15</sup>

Healing relationships in this collective dimension – in community and society, in the church and in the world – calls forth a fourth aspect of cordiality, one that is its own little virtue. St. Francis de Sales calls it “*douceur*,” which we translate as “gentleness” or “meekness.” In the Salesian tradition, that little virtue comes to living expression in the religious order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, founded by St. Francis de Sales, together with St. Jane de Chantal, in 1610.<sup>16</sup>

In his historical study of religious culture at the time of St. Francis and St. Jane,<sup>17</sup> Tom Donlan explores how the “wars of religion” led also to a violent turn in French Catholicism. He shows how religious zeal turned militant and gave rise to a strident belligerence toward Protestant reformers; even among Catholics, opposing viewpoints made faith relationships susceptible to mortal conflict. And Donlan argues, quite convincingly, that the spirituality championed by St. Francis de Sales constituted an effective critique to such religious militancy.

Seen in this societal context, the founding of the Visitation Order gave life to a gentle force in a violent world. Embodying the optimistic spirituality of the founders, these new nuns would form a community of cordial love, manifesting that virtue especially through the “meekness” of the Sisters’ relationships with one another and with others outside the monastery. In imitation of the biblical mystery that gave them their name, they were to become what Hélène Bordes describes as

“the path, the self-same sign of the Church throughout the ages in its movement towards the realization of God’s intent for the world.”<sup>18</sup>

The sign that the Visitation Order was to be marks what Donlan calls “a milestone in the spiritual transformation of Francis de Sales.” The young lad who, before his conversion in Paris, had himself “spoken of his Catholic faith as ‘militant’ and ‘triumphant’,” came to believe “that the Church existed only to ‘carry the gentle Jesus’ and to ‘carry him gently’.” His founding, with Jane de Chantal, of a religious congregation committed to a life of *douceur* brings the Salesian witness of cordial relationality to its culmination.<sup>19</sup>

But that virtue does not end with the Visitation. The movement toward a world of interconnected hearts continues with everyone who strives, in social and ecclesial relationships, to practice cordiality as meekness. Doing so entails and expresses a great strength of heart, a heart fortified by the grace to see others as God sees them – imperfect yet worthy, having personal flaws yet also possessing inherent dignity.

## CONCLUSION

Relationships begin within – in the heart that connects us as human beings to others with whom we interact. How our hearts “see” is what St. Francis de Sales learned through his conversion experience, what he lived in his own way, and what he taught in his works of spiritual direction.

A heart that sees the presence of God in others among us beats with a rhythm of being nice, being pleasant, being neighborly, and being meek. Those expressions of cordiality may not sound impressive, but that’s the nature of a “little” virtue.<sup>20</sup> And such little virtues may not seem sufficient for healing relationships, but they do work – as the saintly tradition of Salesian Spirituality has shown for centuries.

To “Live Jesus” invites us to appreciate the gift of God’s generous mercy in our own lives and to cultivate the virtue of cordiality toward others in response to that divine gift.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted from the author’s keynote address at the annual “Live Jesus” Conferences, held in Reston, Virginia (on 26 March 2022) and in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania (on 2 April 2022). The theme of the 2022 conferences was “Healing Relationships ... Let It Begin with Me.”

<sup>2</sup> WENDY WRIGHT. “Francis de Sales and the Exchange of Divine and Human Hearts,” in John Markey and J. August Higgins (eds.), *Mysticism and Contemporary Life: Essays in Honor of Bernard McGinn* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2019), 183-203, at 190.

<sup>3</sup> See E.J. LAJEUNIE, *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, the Thinker, His Influence*, 2 vols. (translated by Rory O’Sullivan) (Bangalore, India: SFS Publications, 1986), volume 1, chapter 2. See also ELISABETH STOPP, “Francis de Sales at Clermont College: A Jesuit Education in Sixteenth-Century Paris,” in *A Man to Heal Differences: Essays and Talks on St. Francis de Sales* (Philadelphia: St. Joseph’s University Press, 1997), pages 23-50.



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<sup>4</sup> LAJEUNIE, *Saint Francis de Sales*, 56.

<sup>5</sup> LAJEUNIE, *Saint Francis de Sales*, 68.

<sup>6</sup> LAJEUNIE, *Saint Francis de Sales*, 71.

<sup>7</sup> LAJEUNIE, *Saint Francis de Sales*, 71.

<sup>8</sup> LAJEUNIE, *Saint Francis de Sales*, 71.

<sup>9</sup> See also THOMAS F. DAILEY, *Behold This Heart: St. Francis de Sales and Devotion to the Sacred Heart* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> ANDRE BRIX, “Saint François de Sales et le ‘Coeur’,” in *Sainte Marguerite-Marie et le message de Paray-le-Monial*, eds. Raymond Darricau and Bernard Peyrous (Paris: Desclée, 1993), 66.

<sup>11</sup> ST. FRANCIS DE SALES, *The Spiritual Exercises*, translated by William Dougherty, edited by Joseph Chorpenning (Toronto: Peregrina, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> For a Salesian take on how forgiveness impacts relationships, see my 1998 lecture at the St. Thomas More Society in Wilmington (DE) entitled “Peace without Justice: Not Only Possible But Necessary!”

<sup>13</sup> See ST. FRANCIS DE SALES, “On Cordiality,” in *The Spiritual Conferences*, translated by Abbot Gasquet and Canon Dom Mackey (London: Burns & Oates, 1909), pp. 54-70, where the founder addresses “in what consists that cordial love which the sisters [of the Visitation of Holy Mary] ought to bear one another.”

<sup>14</sup> See JOSEPH CHORPENNING, “What Is the ‘Chablais Spirit’?” in *ICSS Newsletter*, no. 19 (July 2006): 1-9, where the quotations that follow are cited.

<sup>15</sup> FR. PAUL SCALIA, “The Church Militant or the Church Belligerent?” on *Catholic Answers* (5/1/2007), with a sidebar quoting from the *Introduction to the Devout Life*!

<sup>16</sup> Accounts of the founding of the Visitation abound. Good summaries can be found in chapter two of *Hidden in God: Essays and Talks on St. Jane Frances de Chantal*, ed. TERENCE O’REILLY (Philadelphia: St. Joseph’s University Press, 1999), and in chapter three of WENDY WRIGHT, *Heart Speaks to Heart: The Salesian Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> THOMAS DONLAN, *The Reform of Zeal: François de Sales and Militant French Catholicism*, St. Andrews Studies in French History and Culture (St. Andrews, UK: University of St. Andrews, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Cited in WRIGHT, *Heart Speaks to Heart*, 53.

<sup>19</sup> See THOMAS DONLAN, “Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary: Witness to a Catholicism of *Douceur*,” in *Love is the Perfection of the Mind, Salesian Studies Presented to Alexander T. Pocetto, O.S.F.S. on the Occasion of His 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, edited by Joseph F. Chorpenning, O.S.F.S., Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S., and Daniel P. Wisniewski, O.S.F.S. (Center Valley, PA: Salesian Center for Faith and Culture, 2017), pp. 35-48, quoted at p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> When suggesting which virtues to practice, St. Francis de Sales advises the choice of “the finest virtues not the most popular; the most excellent, and not the most obvious; the best and not the bravest” (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, III:1).