

THE SACRED VISIONING OF SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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In the history of spirituality, one speaks of “schools” or “traditions” in terms of the thinking, activity, and saintly persons associated with a distinctive way of living that extends beyond the historical period in which it began. One such tradition – Salesian Spirituality – derives from the life and legacy of St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), flowers in several nineteenth century religious movements and congregations, and inspires the “universal call to holiness” championed at the Second Vatican Council.¹ As confirmation of the sacred foundation of this tradition, two episodes from its narrative history suggest that a “visionary” experience is woven into the very fabric of this spirituality.

The first concerns the well-known experience of St. Francis de Sales during his student days in Paris.² There the young Francis endured a terrible “crisis” of one sort or another. The source of this crisis, so formative in one so young, has been much debated. It may have been something “literary,” in the sense that students then had begun to read the concrete and real experiences of patristic writings rather than the abstract and purely logical treatises of the medievalists. Or, it may have been a “devotional” crisis, in that the young Francis’ familial fervor and piety were there being called into question in light of the raging theological debates on predestination. Then again, Francis’ crisis may simply have been a “psychological” problem, in the sense that his conscience was so severely troubled by that debilitating anxiety about which he would later write.³

¹ See Wendy Wright, *Heart Speaks to Heart: The Salesian Tradition*, Orbis Books, 2004.

² E. Lajeunie, *St. Francis de Sales: The Man, The Thinker, His Influence*, trans. Rory O’Sullivan, (Bangalore, SFS Publications, 1986, vol. I, pp. 53-72.

³ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, IV:11 - “With the single exception of sin, anxiety is the greatest evil that can happen to a soul.”

Whatever the cause, the fact that Francis suffered some grave torment is undisputed. But how he came to deal with this grave torment is more significant than its origins. The decision he made holds the key to his spiritual development. Consider the words of his own prayer before the black Madonna, Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance:

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!

In a moment of grace, Francis must have experienced the sacred. And with these words of his submission, he resolves the dilemma of his life. As Lajeunie explains it, Francis “overcame his ‘saintly craving’ for God by transcending it completely.” His life was changed forever ... and he was only nineteen years old!

The second episode happens centuries later, in the time and place of Blessed Louis Brisson (1817-1908), chaplain to the Visitation monastery⁴ in Troyes, France, and founder of the Oblate Sisters and the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. His story of the sacred is a bit different than that of St. Francis de Sales. It is more extended – having taken him some forty years to realize that what was calling for his response was indeed something sacred. It is also more dramatic – and has been reported as such. It is the story of his collaboration with the Visitation superior, Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis (1793-1875), in the founding of the Oblate congregation.

At first, and in fact for a long while, this experience did not seem so sacred to Fr. Brisson. His biographer, Fr. Dufour, sets the scene:

... when the Good Mother broached the question of founding priests under the auspices of St. Francis de Sales, the chap-

⁴ The religious order of the Visitation of Holy Mary was founded by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal in 1610.

lain withdrew into complete silence and stubborn resistance. Absorbed in his personal studies of theology and science, and already burdened with extensive ministry while being deprived of material resources and external influence, he was - above all - a lover of his independence. He was unwilling - at any price - to submit to the influence of a woman - as holy as she was - or to devote himself to a work for which he saw neither the goal nor the means to achieve that goal.⁵

That hesitation should not seem so out of place, even in today's world. Do we not sometimes find ourselves absorbed in our own personal ways? Are we not similarly burdened with the many works demanded of us in the name of ministry? Is not the unwillingness to engage the novel and the unknown but a natural reaction for any of us?

But the story does not end there. The dialogue (and the action of grace) continues, like this:

Fr. Brisson: "Never, Mother, will I bring myself to do what you are proposing to me!"

Good Mother: "But if God leads you to it?"

Fr. Brisson: "Well, then, Mother, since you go that far, I declare to you that nothing will make me bend, even were I to see a dead man restored to life!"

And then it happened. Something sacred breaks forth, there in a simple parlor at the Visitation monastery in Troyes:

Without another word, the Good Mother withdrew, leaving the chaplain in a state of understandable exasperation. Suddenly, behind the grille, Our Lord appeared; His look was severe, his gesture imperative. Totally unnerved, the priest wanted to believe himself the victim of an hallucination, and coldly - for several minutes - he examined, in the minutest details, the mysterious vision. The more he studied it, the more undeniable the reality became, the more the divine will appeared manifest to him; and also the more a celestial peace and a radiant confidence invaded his soul. Then he prostrated himself in adoration and acquiescence to the eternal plans.⁶

⁵ Prosper Dufour, *The Oblates of St. Francis de Sales*, trans. Joseph Bowler, Wilmington, DE: DeSales Publishing, 1994, p. 14 (emphasis added).

⁶ Dufour, *The Oblates*, p. 15.

That acquiescence led to the founding of a new religious congregation, which continues to have an impact on generations of believers. It, too, was an action borne by one man's experience of the sacred. It, too, is not something that one can analyze further, except to say that it could only be the work of a divine Spirit, that same divine Spirit that continues to infuse the world with the Salesian charism.

These two stories are, in their different times and places, very different stories. Yet, if we look to both of them, we can see in these very personal experiences the evidence of a real, and not merely virtual, faith. In fact, it is only through faith that we can make sense of them, as only through faith the two participants could make sense of them.

In both of these experiences of the sacred, real faith is something that goes beyond knowledge, something that exceeds the boundaries of comprehension limited by our minds. For Francis de Sales, the confusion over the matter of predestination was never fully resolved on the intellectual level; he would continue to grapple with this in his later studies at Padua.⁷ For Fr. Brisson, the matter of "giving in" to the dreams of this nun was something that would gnaw at his male bearing for years to come, as evidenced in his later dialogue with Pope Leo XIII.⁸ And yet, both of these men "knew" that their lives, and their future, had changed irreversibly.

This transformation was the result of their experience of the sacred, a "limit experience" that pertains more to the heart and soul than to the head. In some way, each of them was grasped by the divine; each was claimed by a love that could only be supernatural. This we know not by means of scientific analysis, but by the fruits of their lives. They were able to accomplish all that they would precisely because of this sacred experience.

⁷ Lajeunie, *St. Francis de Sales*, vol. I, pp. 80-90.

⁸ Dufour, *The Oblates*, p. 22.

A similar experience has been recorded for posterity in the Spiritual Directory that St. Francis de Sales wrote as a custom book for the Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary.⁹ The preface to that little jewel of a text underscores the need for us, even today, to appropriate the vision in our own spiritual lives.

The context for appreciating the Spiritual Directory is the biblical vision of the prophet and the evangelist, Ezekiel and John. Focusing on the Old Testament figure, we can look to the prophetic narrative (Ezek 2:8 - 3:3) to shed some light on the intent of the Spiritual Directory and its import for those who seek to live by it.¹⁰

But you, mortal, hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and on the back, and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe. He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.

To understand Ezekiel's vision, we must acknowledge something about the person of the prophet. Ezekiel – the name means “God strengthens” and we know that, in our view of the world from below to above, life as a prophet certainly required the strength of God. History acknowledges those courageous and heroic bearers of God's word as persons enjoying a special divine grace.

Yet, in this narrative, God never calls the prophet by this name. Rather, God refers to him as Son of Man – a term which emphasizes the person's mortality, his finiteness in the order of

⁹ See Thomas F. Dailey, OSFS, “Jewel of Perfection: The Spiritual Directory as a Privileged Means of Propagating the Salesian Spirit,” *Indian Journal of Spirituality* 21.4, 2008, pp. 349-362.

¹⁰ On this biblical passage, see Margaret S. Odell, “You Are What You Eat: Ezekiel and the Scroll,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117.2, 1998, pp. 229-248.

things. Perhaps the implicit suggestion is that we should likewise look upon ourselves as before God, to see us as God sees us, from above to below, and always to keep in mind our very real finitude.

The setting for this vision of the Son of Man is that of the Babylonian Exile. There Ezekiel is in his thirtieth year (1:1), concluding, as it were, the time of apprenticeship for priestly service. Yet, in the land of the Exile, where this young apprentice stands ready to become a full-fledged priest, there is no Temple in which he might fulfill his sacral duties. For him and for his nation, this solitary situation calls into question some fundamental truths. Where is the divine reality to be found, for it is no longer uniquely present in the Temple? What value of the priesthood is to be held, if the place of their practice is in shambles? The former question is one on the lips of our post-modern generation; the latter question might also be on the lips of those in ministry today!

In this setting, the vision of Ezekiel is drawn toward the hand of God holding out the scroll. As a product of writing, this message is something decreed, coming, as it were, directly from the hand of God. So, too, it is a fixed writing, something already determined as in the divine judgment to come. Finally, it is a complete work, written front and back and, thus, filling the scroll.

Strangely enough, the prophet is commanded to eat this scroll. Such a strange request, but not an unusual one in the world of prophetic experience. The act of eating the scroll is often interpreted as a means of receiving the message, where the prophet would thus be taking into himself the revelation that God holds forth. But the divine command is not directed to the prophet's ears, as the receptacle of a message, or to his heart, as the place to embrace it. Rather, to eat implies the stomach – and putting papyrus down there is not a pleasant prospect! In this light, the command to eat the scroll is voiced as a test of the would-be prophet's obedience to God.

By fulfilling the command to eat the scroll, Ezekiel becomes a prophet. His place in this sacred fraternity is legitimated by this divinely ordained portent. His former identity as a priest is finally cast off, and his new identity as a prophet is incorporated through this experience of the sacred.

But more than a vocational sign, eating the scroll is, for the new prophet, a means of personally appropriating the truth he will preach. His first taste is one of sweetness, as his perception of the prophetic life first provokes initial joy. Yet, as we soon learn, the scroll does not sit well within him; its bitterness is a knotted reminder that actualizing the message of God in this world is a tiresome and dolorous process of assimilation. Ultimately, this combination of sweetness and bitterness, of perception and actualization, is the dual reality that faces the people of God in Exile. Theirs was the sweet promise of the covenant, by which they are perceived as the people of God. Theirs, too, is the bitter taste of Exile, when the actuality of sin leads to existential disarray.

The teaching of this biblical narrative suggests a rather personal message. In his prophetic vision, in his experience of the sacred, in his eating of the scroll, Ezekiel is a man who becomes the message he is given. So, too, for those who embrace the practice of Salesian spirituality.

If we look to our contemporary situation, we might claim that we are currently experiencing the suffering of an "exile" brought on by post-modernism.¹¹ We suffer from ambiguity, in that our identity is bound up with a spiritual tradition that dates back to the seventeenth century. For modern persons, appeal to the past is not enough to ensure stability; all authority is relative to its present relevance. We suffer uncertainty, in that our understanding of who we are is constantly changing. For us today, appeal to tradition is not enough to ensure certainty; conformity to tradition has been supplanted by the quest for authenticity.

¹¹ Cf. Roger Balducelli, OSFS, "A Commentary on the Spiritual Directory of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales" (unpublished manuscript), chap. 1, pp. 2-5.

We suffer suspicion, in that our continued viability is tenuous, dependent on factors beyond our control. Looking to the future, the status quo is not enough to ensure confidence; “the way it has always been” needs give way to pragmatic planning.

Now, as before, the prophetic message continues – and it is time once again to revisit its place in our lives. The *Spiritual Directory*, that succinct yet stable encoding of the Salesian vision, is, still, something sacred for us. In his wisdom, St. Francis de Sales has bequeathed this book as a sure means of experiencing the sacred in our everyday lives. He offers it to us not as a revelation of the divine mind with words parroted to us for all times; nor is it simply an expression of his own personal preference as a prelate and spiritual director. It is, instead, a pedagogically pragmatic work. It offers do-able exercises which form in those who “eat” it, the food by which we taste the divine in our human lives.¹² And, in the food chain of the spiritual life, this text has high nutritional value. Put simply ... it works!

The experience of the “sacred” offered to us in this text is something available to people even today. Fr. Brisson emphasizes this, in particular, for the Oblate religious congregations, but it remains true for all who embrace Salesian spirituality. For him, the *Spiritual Directory* is the Oblates’ way – a pragmatically effective means by which they can and will experience the sacred. So, too, he claims it as their *raison d’être* – not merely an effective or helpful spiritual tool, but the normative means for their claiming to be who they are. Ultimately, Fr. Brisson defines this text as the principle of their identity – that “something” which makes them distinctive on the image-scape of religious life.¹³

In the Salesian tradition, we might say that the *Spiritual Directory* is that which claims our love.¹⁴ For by our continuing

¹² Balducelli, “Commentary,” chap. 2, pp. 8-11.

¹³ Balducelli, “Commentary,” chap. 2, pp. 11-15.

¹⁴ Cf. Wendy Wright, “Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal, and the Ministry of Love,” The R. Wayne Kraft Memorial Lecture at DeSales University (1997), online at www.desales.edu/_files/server/salesian/library/WW-KraftLecture.pdf

fidelity to the exercises therein prescribed, we allow ourselves to be claimed by the divine Spirit of love that is its origin and end. So, too, the Spiritual Directory is the tool for knowing how to die that we might learn how to live. By putting these exercises into practice, we die to our own preferences and inclinations and learn how to live continuously in the presence of God.

Considering this in more detail, the Preface to the Spiritual Directory narrates the foundation for a renewed experience of the sacred. The words there, in their simple profundity, are able to be digested by anyone who sets him/herself to the task. What follows are but a few comments on the text to entice readers to take up this task.

Come, O sons blessed from all eternity, and as was said to Ezekiel and to St. John the Evangelist, Come, take hold of this book and eat it, swallow it, fill your heart and nourish your soul with it.

Here we are invited, with some urgency (the imperative “come”), to experience the same sacred vision as did the prophet of old. Notice the actions commended to us (set forth with not untypical Salesian embellishment!): “Take hold,” for the doing of these exercises requires an intentional effort. “Eat” and “swallow,” for simply having this text in our possession is not enough. “Fill” and “nourish” those dimensions to our being (heart and soul) that are in need of sustenance and cannot be satisfied elsewhere than in God.

Let its words remain day and night before your eyes, that you may meditate on them, and in your hands, that you may put them into practice, and let your entire being praise God for them.

The invitation extends first to our “eyes” – the doors to the mind and the place of comprehension. But knowing does not suffice. This experience is one for our “hands” – for no matter what ministry we perform or tasks we accomplish, our work is to be sanctified. Ultimately, this experience of the sacred extends to

our “entire being” – as persons created in the image and likeness of God and destined for union with God in eternity.

This book will prove bitter to your interior, for it will lead to the perfect mortification of your self love.

Contrary to the “tastes” of the present generation, contrary perhaps to our own preferences and inclinations, this book sets forth a course of life and love that will draw us out of ourselves and toward the God to whom we are naturally inclined. To reaffirm our “willingness” to serve God in our lives, this first taste of detachment may be “bitter” to swallow, but it cannot be avoided.

It will ... be sweeter than honey in your mouth, because there is no consolation equal to that of mortifying our self-love in order to let live and reign in us the love of him who died for love of us.

This sweetness and consolation, this filling of our hearts and souls with the crucified Jesus, is our experience of love. It is what claims our love. It is an experience of death that enables life. It is, ultimately, our experience of the sacred.

In this way your bitterness will be transformed into the sweetness of a perfect peace, and you will be filled with true happiness.

It is not difficult to imagine that a “false” happiness does exist; our culture offers images of it in many ways. In that happiness there is “nothing sacred.” But, thanks be to God, we know differently. We can know the peace that the world cannot give. We can be sure, with an optimism that is real, not virtual. And we can be truly happy ... when our lives and work are grounded in an experience of something sacred.