



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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### *Self-acceptance Not Self-esteem as a Basic Principle of Salesian Pedagogy*

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#### **Self-acceptance versus Self-esteem**

Rereading the *Introduction to a Devout Life* in the light of the self-esteem movement makes one aware of how incompatible this movement is with the saint's teachings and spirit. The notion of self-esteem as promoted in this movement has had a destructive influence on education and society in the United States as numerous studies have demonstrated over the years. "From 1970 to 2000, there were over 15,000 scholarly articles written on self-esteem and its relationship to everything.... But results were often contradictory or inconclusive. So in 2003 the Association for Psychological Science asked Dr. Roy Baumeister, then a leading proponent of self-esteem, to review this literature. His team concluded that self-esteem was polluted with flawed science. Only 200 of those 15,000 studies met their rigorous standards."<sup>1</sup>

With such a flood of discredited scientific studies, it is no wonder that the self-esteem movement based on ubiquitous and frequently unwarranted praise did not prove that it

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<sup>1</sup> Po Branson, "How Not to Talk to Your Kids," *New York Magazine*, Feb. 12, 2007, available online at <http://www.nymag.com/news/features/27840>. See Roy Baumeister, et al, "Does High Self-Esteem Cause Better Performance, Interpersonal Success or Healthier Life Styles?" *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4 (May 2003):1-44.

achieved its goals among them, a positive effect on academic achievement or reducing violence. Rather it caused people to be self-centered and overly concerned with being liked and appreciated. It led in many instances to self-complacency and a reluctance to try new and challenging things for fear of lessening one's self-esteem or self-worth. "Self-esteem is literally defined by how much value people place on themselves. It is the evaluative component of self-knowledge.... Self-esteem is thus perception rather than reality. It refers to a person's belief about whether he or she is intelligent and attractive, for example, and it does not necessarily say anything about whether the person actually is intelligent and attractive."<sup>2</sup> This is the reason why the many studies of programs that promoted the enhancement of self-esteem never resulted in measurable gains that its adherents had hoped for. In general, self-esteem is the positive manner in which people evaluate and view themselves globally so that they have a good feeling about themselves whether or not this evaluation is based on actual achievements or not. It is not an exaggeration to say that the goal of the self-esteem movement is to make one feel better and better about less and less.

Despite this considerable negative evidence of its effectiveness,<sup>3</sup> the concept and its unrealistic strategies continue to be the inspiration of a number of teacher-training programs and has even infiltrated Catholic education.<sup>4</sup> "Over subsequent years, most striking of all has been verifying the extent to which this self-esteem philosophy has been absorbed by many Catholic educationalists, and hence is leaving its mark on curricula for primary and secondary schools (including religious education programs), and indeed on the formative spirit present in some religious houses or seminaries."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Baumeister, 2.

<sup>3</sup> "Cfr. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner, 1979); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Charles J. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Wendy Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions* (New York: Vintage, 1993)," as noted by Cormac Burke, "Self-esteem: Why? Why not?" *Homilectic & Pastoral Review*, (February 2008):8-19. Online [http://www.ignatius.com/magazines/hprweb/burke\\_feb08.htm](http://www.ignatius.com/magazines/hprweb/burke_feb08.htm).

<sup>4</sup> See Sr. Patricia McCormack, IHM, *Fostering Student Self-esteem in the Catholic Elementary School*, Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Education Association, 1999. Although there are many good, solid teaching strategies provided in this manual, the goal appears to be to have the students feel good about themselves. For example on "Focus Sheet #5: Classroom Climate", in the Bottom Line section, we read, "Consequently, the children feel good about themselves and have a growing confidence in their ability." (p. 93). Another example on the topic "Concluding Activity and Prayer: Called to Be Catalysts of Love," the section on Reflection: "I invite you to think of the quality or attitude that makes you feel loved or lovable.... What do you most need to experience in order for you to accept the concept that someone loves you?" (p. 96). Notice she states "to accept the concept" rather than the truth, the fact, the belief that someone loves you, viz., God. In her bibliography, she lists a number of official documents on Catholic education as well as the documents of Vatican II. However, there is no listing of any studies that are critical of the self-esteem movement, which is obviously the inspiration for this manual.

<sup>5</sup> Burke, 16

Cormac Burke clearly understands the incompatibility of the self-esteem philosophy with Christian principles: "A philosophy that holds that each one must actualize or fulfill one's self through centering on self-worth and autonomy, establishing one's own system of values and reaching one's potential—simply by 'being oneself' and being content with oneself—is just not compatible with Christianity. However, in Christianity such a mindset might possibly find the solution to all its inherent weaknesses and illogicalities, and even the way out of them."<sup>6</sup>

Given this infiltration of a pedagogical philosophy so alien to Christian teaching and wisdom, an approach that confronts the prevailing educational concept of self-esteem with the teaching of Francis de Sales should provide a healthy antidote to the pernicious effects of this movement. It is the purpose of this study to demonstrate that the saint's teaching on self-acceptance is the very anti-thesis of this concept of self-esteem, and provides a sound pedagogy for an authentic personal development, based on self-acceptance and truthful self-knowledge.

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## Concept of Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance in the teaching of Francis de Sales is the truthful and grateful acknowledgement of both our "blessings and brokenness."<sup>7</sup> In this sense, it is inextricably joined to the virtue of humility as propounded by the saint and in many ways interchangeable with it, as we hope to illustrate. It is founded on the biblical truth that we are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27),<sup>8</sup> but born broken. This truth is aptly expressed by the American playwright Eugene O'Neill when he states: "Men are born broken. Living is mending, and grace is the glue." This brokenness creates a restlessness in us for healing or wholeness. One theologian views this restlessness as rooted in the desire to know. "The only story or image of God that can fully satisfy the requirements of the basic drive to know is one which narrates his unconditional acceptance of man. This flows from the necessity of self-acceptance as the condition for appropriate release of the urge to know."<sup>9</sup> This story is that of Creation and Redemption.

This "unconditional acceptance of man" is strongly underscored by Francis de Sales for the purpose of engendering self-acceptance/humility in the ten meditations set forth in

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Wendy Wright illuminates this paradox: "Humility is the simultaneous and clear-eyed recognition of this profound paradox of blessing and brokenness. Humility in Salesian sensibilities expresses itself, first in a lively acknowledgement of this truth," "Salesian Spirituality and the Art of Spiritual Direction," *Studies in Spirituality* (June 1996), 209-210.

<sup>8</sup> "We are created in the image and likeness of God. What does this mean if not that we have the utmost congruity with his divine majesty," *Treatise on the Love of God: St. Francis de Sales*, trans. and ed. J.K. Ryan, Stella Niagara, N.Y.: De Sales Resource Center, 2007, I:91. Hereafter TLG.

<sup>9</sup> John F. Haught, *Religion and Self-Acceptance*, New York, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1976, 153

Part I of the *Devout Life*. The clear aim of these ten meditations is to make us face and accept our blessings and our brokenness, especially our “dark” side, and to find the courage and willingness to overcome our brokenness. In short, they are intended to place us on the path of self-acceptance. The saint advises us to reflect on them in the order in which they are presented so as to finish them on a positive, optimistic note and not be discouraged. This explains their arrangement. The first three are on our blessings; the next four on sin, death, judgment, and hell, and the last three, on paradise, on choosing heaven and the last on choosing the devout life. Acknowledgement of both our blessings and our brokenness engenders gratitude.

The first meditation asks us to dwell on our nothingness and our greatness: “God has drawn you out of that nothingness to make you what you now are and he has done so solely out of his own goodness without need of you.” But this is only part of the story. Through God’s gratuitous action of drawing us out of nothingness comes our worth and dignity: “Consider that nature God has given you. It is the highest in this visible world; it is capable of eternal life and of being perfectly united to his divine majesty.”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to remind us in the second meditation that: “God has given us intellect to know him, memory to be mindful of him, will to love him, imagination to picture to yourself his benefits, eyes to see his wonderful works, tongue to praise him, and so on with the other faculties.”<sup>11</sup> These considerations are not intended to enhance our self-esteem or make us self-satisfied or self-complacent. Our saint emphasizes this when he proposes the following resolution: “From now on, I will no longer be self-complacent, since of myself I am nothing....You who are truly nothing, why do you glory in yourself.”<sup>12</sup> So these considerations have as their goal to lead us to self-appropriation and self-acceptance in our totality, in our gifts and in our lack.

The following observation succinctly expresses the basic Salesian pedagogical approach to improving the human condition through self-acceptance: “Participation in the story of the Yes by God to man on the basis of friendship rather than coercion provides for many the symbolic basis for a sincere Yes to themselves.”<sup>13</sup> The basis of friendship, which Francis de Sales delineates in both of his great spiritual classics, is charity, the love of friendship with God.<sup>14</sup> We note the insistence on choice and freedom in these introductory meditations: “The Choosing of Heaven,” “The Choosing of the Devout Life.” This is more precisely explicated in the *Treatise* where he says: “What then are the ordinary cords by which God’s providence is wont to draw our hearts to his love?... ‘I will draw them,’ he says in Osee [11:14], ‘with human cords with bands of love’ and

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<sup>10</sup> Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, complete and unabridged, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. and ed. A. Mookenthottan, MSFS, A. Nazareth, MSFS, & A. Kolencherry, MSFS, Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1995, Pt. I, chp. 9. Hereafter IDL.

<sup>11</sup> IDL, Pt. I, chp. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Pt. I, chp. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Haught, 175.

<sup>14</sup> See TLG, Bk. 1, chp. 13.

friendship. Beyond doubt, Theotimus, we are drawn to God not by iron chains, like bulls and buffalos, but by means of allurements, sweet attractions, and holy inspirations. In short, these are the cords of Adam and humanity, that is, bands that are proportionate and fitted to the human heart to which liberty is natural.”<sup>15</sup> The Doctor of Love had a great respect for human freedom and with great lucidity demonstrated the inextricable link between freedom and love, viz., that the gift of freedom has been given us so that we may be able to love God and others in God.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that self-acceptance leads to freedom should enrich it as a pedagogical strategy because of the implications it has for assuming responsibility for our actions and our lives. One writer expresses this relationship in this fashion: “You are free and you will find yourself graceful as you assume the responsibility for yourself and others.”<sup>17</sup> Self-acceptance leads to such a freedom since this freedom is not operable without genuine love. This is what Salesian teaching is intended to achieve, especially as presented and read in the Creation and Redemption story deftly woven into the fabric of the opening meditations of the *Devout Life*. They are an invitation to be free to accept and to give love. The reason is that these meditations bring about an awareness of our calling to be co-creators and collaborators with God. Self-acceptance/humility as loving our abjection, our lowliness, our meanness, our brokenness, in a word, our nothingness requires a free act on our part that transitions us from an heteronomous view of Creation and Redemption to an autonomous mode.

This freedom is a result of our acceptance of God’s unconditional love for us. Our saint expresses this acceptance in the meditation on “Choosing Paradise,” where he urges us to pray: “Jesus, my Saviour, I accept your everlasting love. I acknowledge the purchase you have made for me of a place and a habitation in this happy Jerusalem, not so much for anything else as to love and praise you forever.”<sup>18</sup> Haught makes us understand the liberation that self-acceptance brings: It “promotes a truthfulness toward oneself...as to eliminate any fear of uncovering one’s darker side. One is accepted in any case. Nothing that he can do or leave undone will change this situation. There is no longer any need to hide from oneself. One can now accept his past, link up to his previously repressed experiences and live fully in the present. In accepting himself as he is, he is free in a genuinely human meaning of the term. The only barrier to such freedom is the refusal to accept the fact that one is accepted.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> TLG, I:132.

<sup>16</sup> See Alexander Pocetto, OSFS, “Freedom to Love: A Close Reading of Francis de Sales’s Letter of 14 October to Jane de Chantal,” in *Human Encounter in the Salesian Tradition*, ed. Joseph Chorprenning, OSFS, Rome: International Commission on Salesian Studies, 2007, 125-26.

<sup>17</sup> Sam Keen, *To a Dancing God*, New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 136, as cited by Haught, 167-68.

<sup>18</sup> IDL, Pt. I, chp. 17

<sup>19</sup> Haught, 173.

Francis de Sales was very aware of our reluctance “to accept the fact the one is accepted” because of our natural tendency of dwelling on our “dark” or shadowy side and how easily this preoccupation brings on a spiritual inertia and apathy that make us get down on ourselves. Our sins and imperfections create a serious barrier to self-acceptance since they easily convince us that liberating ourselves from them is a formidable and discouraging task. So our saint sets out to encourage us to accept the challenge of self-acceptance by observing:

Let us not be disturbed by our imperfections, because our perfection consists in fighting them. And we cannot fight them unless we see them, nor can we overcome them if we do not come across them. Our victory is not in not being aware of them but in not consenting to them. And to be bothered by them is not the same as consenting to them.”

In this spiritual struggle, we have to be wounded sometimes in order that we may practise humility, but we shall never suffer defeat unless we lose either life or courage.<sup>20</sup>

He says in effect “As long as we are willing to fight, we are winners and not losers.” These are certainly heartening words that give us the courage to face our brokenness head on and work to overcome our shortcomings. The battle of self-acceptance may make us battered, bloody and wounded, but this should not discourage us because as one writer aptly notes, “imperfection is rather the crack in the armor, the 'wound' that lets 'God' in.”<sup>21</sup> It is “at the very point of vulnerability...where the surrender takes place - that is where God enters. God comes through the wound.”<sup>22</sup> This openness to our vulnerability that is essential to self-acceptance has important ramifications for learning and improving as will be noted later.

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## Humility, Self-acceptance and Self-esteem

We have maintained above that, for the purposes of this study, self-acceptance as deduced from Salesian teaching is practically interchangeable with his notion of the virtue of humility. When the chapters in the *Devout Life* on the virtue of humility are viewed through the lens of the self-esteem movement, this interchangeability becomes more apparent. These chapters are a stinging rebuke and critique of the enhancement or promotion of self-esteem. The opening salvo is unleashed in the first sentences of the chapter on “Exterior Humility”: “Vainglory is the glory we give ourselves for what is not in us, or for what is in us but is not ours, or what is in us and is ours but for which we do not deserve any credit. Nobility of race, the favour of the great and popularity are not in us but either in our predecessors or in the esteem of others.”<sup>23</sup> When

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<sup>20</sup> IDL, Pt., I, chp. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Story Telling and the Journey to Wholeness*, New York: Bantam Books, 1994, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Marion Woodman, “Worshipping Illusions,” in *Parabola*, 12:2 (May 1987):64, as cited in Kurtz, 29.

<sup>23</sup> IDL, Pt. III, chp. 4.

understood in the light of the considerations made in the meditations of Part I, this statement completely deflates the practice of those seeking to enhance their self-esteem since there is no basis in truth for doing so. Our saint expands upon the idea of vainglory:

Some take pride in their curled moustaches, a well-trimmed beard, crisped hair, soft hands, in their ability to dance, play or sing. Are they not showing lack of courage in seeking to enhance their value and increase their reputation through such trifling and silly things? Some wish to be honoured and respected by people for a little learning as if everyone ought to become their pupils and hold them as masters; they are, therefore, called pedants. Some strut themselves like peacocks thinking they are beautiful and believe everyone is courting them. All this is extremely vain, foolish, insolent, and the glory based on such silly things is called vain, foolish, frivolous....

Knowledge dishonours us when it puffs us up and degenerates into pedantry....Honour received as a gift is excellent but becomes mean when exacted, sought after and demanded.<sup>24</sup>

This description of vainglory strikes at the very heart of the concept of self-esteem promoted by the self-esteem movement, viz., to be concerned about and to cultivate such an image that bolsters our self-esteem and makes us feel good about ourselves. Francis demonstrates clearly, cuttingly and convincingly how absurd such self-esteem is since it is based on such, vain, trivial and insubstantial things. Here Francis de Sales is doing nothing more than echoing in particularly picturesque and effective language the Christian wisdom of the ages.

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## Self-acceptance, Gratitude and Generosity

The religious quality of the concept of self-acceptance is established and maintained by an act of gratitude.<sup>25</sup> The overall aim of the meditations in Part I of the *Devout Life* is to engender gratitude and humility for all the gifts God gives and continues to give us. Francis de Sales gives the rationale for these meditations in one of the chapters on humility:

Nothing indeed can humble us so much before the mercy of God as the multitude of his benefits, and nothing can humble us so deeply before his justice as the multitude of our misdeeds. Let us consider what he has done for us and what we have done against him. As we consider in detail our sins so also let us reflect in detail on the graces he has given us. There is no need to fear that the knowledge of the gifts bestowed on us will make us

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> See Haught, 162.

proud provided we are attentive to the truth that the good that is in us is not from us... What good do we have that we have not received? If we have received it, then why are we proud (1 Cor. 4:7)? On the contrary, a lively consideration of the graces received makes us humble, for recognition of them begets gratitude.”<sup>26</sup>

Notice how humility makes us accept not only our blessings but also our brokenness and makes us acknowledge the truth about ourselves, viz., that whatever good we have in us comes from God and whatever evil or imperfection comes from our nothingness. Self-acceptance or humility must by its very nature lead to generosity because our God-given gifts are not intended solely for ourselves. So our saint severely criticizes those who fail to use their gifts:

Others refuse to employ their talents in the service of God and neighbour, because they feel that they know their weakness. In fact, they are afraid of becoming proud if they are instruments of something good, and so while enlightening others, they would burn themselves out. All this is mere pretence and a kind of humility that is not only false but also malicious. By this means, they wish silently and subtly to find fault with the things of God or at all events to conceal self-love, love of their own opinion, their own moods and laziness, under the pretext of humility.<sup>27</sup>

This observation gives us an understanding of the psychology behind those who want to have their self-esteem enhanced and are fearful of trying to improve themselves or to help others because they might endanger or fail to bolster their self-image and misconceived self-worth. Elaborating on this idea, Francis continues: “The proud man who trusts in himself has good reason for not undertaking anything. The humble man is all the more courageous, the more he realizes that he is powerless; the more he esteems himself worthless, the more daring he becomes, because he puts his whole trust in God who is pleased to exalt his almighty power in our weakness and manifest his mercy in our misery. Therefore we may dare all that is judged suitable for our progress by those who guide us.”<sup>28</sup> What an empowering thought and teaching strategy this makes! Acceptance of our worthlessness and powerlessness far from paralyzing and demeaning us makes us powerful, daring and courageous in dealing with our brokenness and our shortcomings because we esteem all the more God’s gifts in us. This in turn makes us generous. What authenticates genuine humility or self-acceptance is generosity. “The humility that does not produce generosity,” the saint warns, “is unquestionably false.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> IDL, Pt. III, chp. 5.

<sup>27</sup> IDL, Pt. III, chp. 6.

<sup>28</sup> IDL, Pt. III, chp. 5.

<sup>29</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Spiritual Conferences*, trans. Ivo Carniero, MSFS, Bangalore: SFS Publications, I: 79.

## Abjection, Self-acceptance and Self-esteem

For Francis de Sales, the zenith of humility consists not only in accepting our abjection, i.e., our meanness and lowliness, but of loving our abjection, loving our meanness, lowliness, and pettiness:

For abjection is the littleness, lowliness and meanness which is in us without our thinking of it. But the true virtue of humility is the real knowledge and voluntary recognition of our abjection.

The highest point of humility consists not only in the voluntary acknowledgement of our abjection but in loving it and taking pleasure in it.<sup>30</sup>

At first reading, it appears that our saint is saying that humility/self-acceptance consists in getting down on ourselves or feeling bad about ourselves and reveling in a kind of morbid pleasure. Two notable Salesian scholars have given us a deeper understanding of what the saint means by loving our abjection. One elucidates this puzzling phrase in the following way:

Francis' advice about loving one's own abjection can, at first reading, be profoundly disturbing.... At first the phrase seems to conjure up a world-and-body-denying ethos that would have human kind groveling in its own deprivation. Yet this perspective is difficult to reconcile with Francis' Christian humanist optimism. Gradually it is possible to discern what Francis means. The call is not simply to accept but to *love* our abjections. To love our abjections is to love ourselves as we are loved, in our wholeness. It is also to have compassion for ourselves. It is to see that the true place of transformation is not in our gifts but in our weaknesses. It is to know ourselves as wounded yet beloved and thus to know each other most truly. For in our need we call each other forth. To love our abjections is to shatter the images of self-perfection we would like to project. It is thus to enter into the mystery of loving all that is human, and from there to begin to love all humans most truly.<sup>31</sup>

Lovingly accepting our abjection opens us up to love, to see and love ourselves as God sees and loves us in our blessings and brokenness. In loving ourselves as God loves us, we open ourselves to loving others in God and for God. Furthermore, "it shatters the images of self-perfection we would like to project." For "self-perfection," we can readily and legitimately substitute "the images of self-esteem, we would like to project" because the notion of self-esteem as promoted and espoused in most educational programs implies self-perfection, self-perfectibility.

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<sup>30</sup> IDL, Pt. III, chp. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Wendy, Wright, *Francis de Sales: Introduction to a Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God*, New York: Crossroads, 1993, 87.

This notion of humility/self-acceptance as loving our abjection opens us up to ourselves as noted by Haught: "Self-acceptance is the prerequisite for genuine and animating adherence to the imperatives of the mind. I cannot be fully open to the world, to others, to beauty without being open to myself"<sup>32</sup> In the thought of Francis de Sales, self-acceptance is not only a prerequisite to the imperatives of the mind, but more especially to the imperatives of the heart, the imperatives of love. Self-acceptance, in opening us to ourselves and others, opens us up to love and a true self-knowledge. It gives us the courage and the determination to undertake the voyage of self-discovery by going out of ourselves to love others. This is certainly the position that our saint takes, following the interpretation of Erasmus and contemporary exegetes, in explicating the phrase of the Canticle of Canticles (1:7): "If you do not know yourself, then leave," i.e., go out of yourself by loving others.<sup>33</sup>

Another Salesian Scholar emphasizes the idea of loving our abjections as making us see and love the truth about ourselves: "Abjections are to be accepted and loved because they make us realize what we truly are. They are to be gently accepted and loved. To love our abjections means to love the truth about ourselves. It is a grace and leads to intimate union with God."<sup>34</sup>

Baumeister observes: "The Judeo-Christian tradition has long considered modesty and humility as virtues conducive to spiritual growth. In this tradition, high self-esteem is suspect because it opens the door to sentiments of self-importance. Medieval theologians considered pride or vainglory to be particularly satanic and thus a deadly sin. To combat it, religious devotees cultivated an unattractive appearance (e.g., shorn hair, no makeup, unfashionable clothes, no jewelry), spoke with self-effacement, and submitted to degrading exercises (e.g., begging, prostrations, self-flagellations)."<sup>35</sup> Although our saint would agree with this psychologist's observation about high self-esteem leading to self-importance, he was not sympathetic to most of the humiliating and exaggerated exercises that some saints practiced under what he viewed as extraordinary inspirations. In his view, they are more to be admired than imitated.<sup>36</sup> He emphasizes the fact that in our daily lives, we do not have to go looking for abjections; they occur frequently through our human condition and frailty. He gives a number of

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<sup>32</sup> Haught, 153.

<sup>33</sup> See Alexander Pocetto, OSFS, "Introduction to Salesian Anthropology, *Salesian Studies*, (Summer 1969):36-62. Also online at: <http://www4.desales.edu/SCFC/SalStudies2.htm#Pocetto>.

<sup>34</sup> Antony Mookenthottam, MSFS, "The Word Abjection In St. Francis de Sales," *Indian Journal of Spirituality*, 19 (Oct.-Dec. 2006):400.

<sup>35</sup> Baumeister, 3.

<sup>36</sup> "If some great servants of God pretended to be fools in order to appear mean before the people, we must admire them and not imitate them. They had some very personal and extraordinary motives for doing such deeds. Hence no one must draw any conclusions for himself from them," IDL, Pt. III, chp. See also *Treatise*, Bk. 8, chp. 12.

examples in the chapter on “Loving our Abjections.”<sup>37</sup>

Loving our abjection, our saint tells us leads “to esteem our neighbor all the more in comparison to ourselves.”<sup>38</sup> How are we to understand this statement because it is obvious that some people have greater gifts than others? One author offers a good way of understanding such a statement in the light of self-acceptance:

Unconditional self-acceptance does allow you to rate different aspects of yourself. Indeed it encourages this type of evaluation, since doing this allows you to focus on your negative aspects and, if possible, do something to improve them without self-blame. Conversely, if you focus on your negative aspects from the standpoint of self-rating or self-esteem, then you are less likely to change them, because you are sidetracked by giving your ‘self’ a global negative rating for having these aspects. It is difficult to change anything while you are berating yourself for having these aspects in the first place.”<sup>39</sup>

Our saint encourages us to consider the specific gifts along with the general gifts God has endowed us with to foster self-acceptance/humility. So if we have certain specific gifts which others obviously do not have, e.g., good public speaking or math skills, it is not humility to deny these. However, the fact that we have them does not make us better persons than others. So obviously what the saint means here about not esteeming ourselves above others is that we should not consider ourselves to be morally superior to others because it is not possible for us to evaluate and know with certainty the moral goodness of others.

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## Good Name, Self-acceptance, Self-esteem

The society of Francis de Sales’ day, with its markedly hierarchical structure, placed a good deal of emphasis on one’s good name and the good name of one’s family. So it is not surprising that he devotes an entire chapter to this topic as it relates to the virtue of humility. He stresses its importance in the following way:

Now humility does not allow us to have any desire of excelling others or of having the right to be preferred to others. It will not permit us to seek after praise, honour and glory which are due only to excellence. But it agrees with the warning of the Wise man who admonishes us to have care for our good name (Sirach 41:15) because good name is an esteem not of excellence but only of a simple honesty and integrity of life. Humility

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<sup>37</sup> See IDL, Pt. III, chp. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Windy Dryden, *Developing Self-Acceptance: A Brief, Educational Small Group Approach*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998, 32.

does not prevent us from recognizing them in ourselves and as a consequence desiring a reputation for it.

The duty of keeping our good name, and being such as we are esteemed, urges on us a generous courage and a powerful and gentle violence.<sup>40</sup>

Our saint does not see any conflict between humility/self-acceptance and esteeming our good name by living up to it because it is so important for society. This kind of self-esteem does not make us consider ourselves as better than others, and it is something that we achieve and have to keep working at to maintain.

Having said this, he was well aware of the extremes to which many in the noble class went to preserve their good name and how readily and easily they were eager to defend it when they thought it was compromised by real or imagined insults:

However, we are not to be very eager, exacting and too formal in preserving our good name. For those who are very touchy and sensitive about their reputation resemble those who take medicines for every little discomfort. While thinking of preserving their health, they ruin it utterly. In the same manner, those who wish to keep their reputation with such concern lose it entirely. By such touchiness they render themselves [odd], obstinate, unbearable and provoke the malice of detractors. Disregard and contempt of the insult and calumny is usually a much more wholesome remedy than resentment, strife and revenge. Contempt makes them vanish, but if we become angry we seem to admit them.<sup>41</sup>

This oversensitivity to preserving our good name might reveal that it is based on a very shaky foundation: "The excessive fear of losing our good name indicates a great lack of confidence about its foundation which is the genuineness of a good life.... Those who feel themselves weak are disturbed at every instance. Philothea, he who wishes to be esteemed by all, loses the esteem of all. He deserves to lose his honour who wishes to be esteemed by those whose vices make them truly infamous and dishonoured."<sup>42</sup> If we substitute self-esteem for a good name or a good reputation, then the saint's remarks here admirably paint the dispositions that maintaining or enhancing our self-esteem can cause as a number of critical studies of the self-esteem movement have shown. So his observations are born out by experience.

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<sup>40</sup> IDL, III, chp. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusions

We have tried to demonstrate the devastating effects that the mindset of the self-esteem movement has and can have on educational programs and its spill-over in society. The use of the term self-esteem can, of course, have a positive meaning and designate a self-evaluation in accord with students' real achievements and accomplishments that make them feel good about themselves. Unfortunately, it has been severely tainted by the self-esteem movement and hence carries with it a lot of harmful baggage to the educational enterprise so that Baumeister advises to forget the term.<sup>43</sup>

As noted above, one critic of this movement sees in Christianity possible solutions to the self-esteem mindset regarding "all its inherent weaknesses and illogicalities, and even the way out of them."<sup>44</sup> It is the major thrust of this paper to show how the teaching of Francis de Sales on the virtue of humility has effectively pointed out its "inherent weaknesses and illogicalities" and provides a reliable and time-tested "way out of them." If this is so, then one might logically ask what does the term self-acceptance bring to this teaching and why not simply stick with humility? It is this writer's belief that the concept of self-acceptance as proposed above more readily helps one appreciate the relevance of the saint's teaching for educational programs because it emphasizes more directly God's total acceptance of us and the fact that we in turn must reciprocate by accepting and loving ourselves. It stresses in a more effective way the gratuitousness or the giftedness of our nature and that everything is a gift. Self-acceptance engenders a sound self-love that is other directed and open – to God, others and the world. Humility in the minds of many is readily misunderstood and appears to emphasize our dark side, our brokenness, while self-acceptance helps us embrace our blessings and our brokenness. People with an exaggerated self-esteem deep down have difficulty accepting themselves as they really are and use all kinds of ruses and props to hide their shortcomings from themselves. Self-acceptance can more readily help penetrate this harmful wall of denial.

One should not conclude that this study advocates abandoning the idea of humility. It is rather an attempt to make the Salesian view of humility better understood and esteemed by approaching it from the viewpoint of self-acceptance. In this way, we do not try to avoid the truth of our nothingness and come to the realization that our sense of worthlessness is not a sense of hopelessness but a sense of great strength that encourages us to continually learn and improve ourselves.

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<sup>43</sup> "It is much better to have self-esteem that is contingent on genuine achievements. ...my advice is to forget about self-esteem and concentrate on teaching your children self-control. Self-control over emotions and behavior has been shown to be much more effective than high self-esteem in making people successful throughout their lives." Burke, 12, citing Carol Milstone's interview of Baumeister, *National Post*, March 23, 1999.

<sup>44</sup> Burke, 16.