



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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A Hermeneutical Strategy for a Liberationist Interpretation of St. Francis de Sales

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I. The Need for a "New Hermeneutic" in Reading and Interpreting St Francis de Sales

Anyone who studies St Francis de Sales or explores his spirituality can find rich resources and advice for leading a life faithful to the gospel call. His classic work, the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, has provided the key to embarking on a life of prayer and discipleship for countless thousands of Christians during the past four hundred years.¹ Nonetheless, there are those who would say that his kind of spirituality is out of date and no longer in keeping with the needs and challenges facing faithful Christians today. The overriding emphasis in Francis' writings seems to be on personal conversion or change. There appears to be very little which might address the larger questions of social justice and the challenge to followers of Jesus today to work for the structural changes essential to bring about a genuine transformation of society.

The various movements in the world today and in the Church and the writings of the liberation theologians have made us more aware that the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus calls for both a change of heart and a change of structures. The Indian biblical theologian George Soares-Prabhu, has provided a clear description of the two-fold nature of our task as followers of Jesus today:

A change of hearts without a change of structures... will leave present oppression unchanged. A change of structures without a change of hearts will lead to new oppression, as the 'liberated' oppressed are driven by the as yet unexercised demons of selfishness and greed that possess them to become oppressors in their turn. Only the two together can shape the world in which there will be neither oppressor nor oppressed, because men have learnt to live together without exploiting one another in fellowship and freedom.²

Thus, the question this article addresses is: What place does Salesian spirituality have in this new context and in face of the new challenges to work for a more just and peaceful human community? Do Francis de Sales' writings have anything to say to us today about the larger questions of the transformation of society and the need for a more just economic, political and social order in our world?

II. A "New Hermeneutic" for the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola

Similar questions have been raised about other classic spiritual writers, for example, St Ignatius of Loyola and his *Spiritual Exercises*. Fr Rudolph C. Heredia, S.J., for instance responds to accusations that "the *Spiritual Exercises* have been coopted in the privatization of spirituality so as to reinforce social indifference."³ He calls for a transcending of the *Spiritual Exercises* as mere private exercises. He argues that "... we need a new hermeneutical understanding of the Exercises that will make the Ignatian charism come alive for us today, by re-reading the Exercises in the light of our commitment to faith-justice."⁴ Thus he suggests a method to make them more relevant today.

Fr Heredia proposes to adopt some of the recent developments in the interpretation of the Bible and apply them to the writings of Ignatius. In this lie depends especially on the work of liberation theologians in formulating a hermeneutical strategy for reading and interpreting the biblical text. These liberation theologians build on the traditional historical-critical method, but try to move beyond it.

The historical-critical method has been developed over the last two hundred years as a way of uncovering the "intention of the author" of the particular passage or book in the Bible. A study of the context, the culture, and the historical situation which the author was addressing helps us to understand what he or she intended to say to the people of his or her day. That same text addresses its in our day, to confront and challenge or to encourage and console. But how can a text written thousands of years ago in a different age and culture say anything relevant to us? We are so far removed in time and space and "world-view" from the author or authors and their audience.

One way to look at it is to see it as a process of a "merging of horizons" or world-views.⁵ By studying the results of archeological and historical investigations into the background of these books, we can come to a better understanding of who the author or authors of the Bible were and what the world in which they lived was like. From the knowledge and a study of their writings, we enter into their world-view and catch some glimpse of how they saw God as present and active in their lives and in the history of their people. When we look upon the world of our day,

we see how it is similar to, yet different from the world of the biblical author. We merge our horizons into a single larger picture and try to imagine how that God whom we recognize as having been present and active in the biblical author's day continues to be present and active in our own day.

Heredia also draws upon some of the insights of Paul Ricoeur regarding the "surplus of meaning" in classic texts.⁶ Once a text has left the hand of the original author, it takes on a life of its own. Readers in later times and cultural situations come to the text with different backgrounds and different questions. The text is able to speak to them in new ways and yield new meanings and insights. Such meanings and insights may go beyond the original intention of the author or the understanding of his or her audience. Thus, when we read the Bible today, we are able to reach conclusions and take decisions in ways faithful to our religious tradition, loyal and obedient to our God, but responding faithfully and courageously to the challenges and crises of our own day.

The key difference for the liberationist approach comes, of course, in what one recognizes as the truly crucial and critical questions and challenges of our time. They are not only questions of personal conversion and loyalty to Christian ideals. They involve as well the issues of justice and peace. The unjust structures of our society in the economic, political and social spheres prolong the effects of personal sin. Too often they support, encourage and reward injustice, oppression, greed and exploitation. Our call as faithful Christians demands that we challenge and confront these unjust structures. We refuse to cooperate with them and work to reform and replace them.

III. A "New Hermeneutic" for the Writings of St Francis de Sales

If we are to make Francis de Sales relevant for our day, we need to re-read and reinterpret his writings, adopting this modern critical liberationist approach to the scriptures. It is not a matter of turning Francis into a liberation theologian himself. He was a man of his times and he addressed the questions and challenges of his day with courage and insight. So profound and inspired was his response to those questions and challenges that he was able to crystallize in clear and compelling form much that is fundamental and perennial in Christian spirituality. But Francis was certainly not a modern liberation theologian in disguise. The questions and issues with which modern liberation theologians struggle had not yet assumed the focus of attention which they occupy today. It would be inaccurate to present Francis as a liberation theologian and his spirituality as a "liberationist" spirituality in the modern sense of the term.

Nonetheless, there are aspects of his thought and writings which are capable of being reinterpreted "from a liberation perspective" and which can offer a powerful and credible approach to the Christian life that is true to the spirit of Francis and relevant for us today.

This programme for interpreting St Francis de Sales involves an attempt to merge our horizons with his and to discern those aspects and insights in his writings that are open to an interpretation and development from a socially conscious and liberationist perspective. It is an attempt to enter into a conversation, a dialogue with Francis. He began the conversation some four hundred years ago. Today we pick up the threads of that conversation and allow him to speak in dialogue with

us. This is the way in which Fr Heredia describes his attempt to formulate a "new hermeneutic" for reading and interpreting the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius:

This then is the conversation, - perhaps he would call it a colloquy - that we, with this new hermeneutic, want to initiate and carry on with our Father Master Ignatius in the Spiritual Exercises. We want to enter into his context and comprehend his world view from within as it were, while being fully aware of the concerns and aspirations, fears and our hopes that make up our own situation and world. And as we question his Spiritual Exercises from where we are, we must allow the fundamental options and commitments, the values and the mind-set there, to challenge us in our present situation and calling.⁷

We have a similar task as followers of St Francis de Sales, to articulate that "new Salesian word" to a new age and a new generation, in the light of our commitment to build a more just and life-giving human community.

IV. A First Example: The "Sixth Meditation" on the Final judgement (Introduction, Part I, Chapter 14)

Chapter 14 of Part I in the *Introduction* provides a good example of how one might engage in this "dialogue" or conversation with Francis, this re-reading of his writings in the light of the challenges of our own day and our commitments to build a world of justice and peace. Chapter 14 represents one of the meditations which St Francis proposes to guide his Philothea toward a firm decision and resolution to follow "the devout life." These meditations are foundational to Salesian spirituality. They reveal to us the principal sources upon which St Francis de Sales drew in providing the motivation for those who placed themselves under his direction to make a firm commitment to follow the Lord.

Chapter 14 contains the "Sixth Meditation: The Final Judgement." Here Francis sets the scene for Philothea to ponder in prayer. It is obviously based on the last judgement scene in chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel, "When the Son of Man comes in glory" and "will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (vv. 31-32);

3. Consider the Majesty of the Judge when he appears attended by the saints and angels, his Cross before him shining like the sun, a symbol of mercy for the good and of justice for the wicked.

4. At his command the good and wicked will be separated, the good on his right the wicked on his left, separated forever, never to meet again.

That Francis has the Matthean parable in mind is clear from the words of the Judge in sentencing the wicked: "*Go far from me, you that are accursed, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels*" (Mt 25:41). Similarly, Francis paraphrases Mt 25:34 in the judge's invitation to the just: "*Come, you who have received a blessing from my Father* (to be blessed of the Father is to receive all blessings); *take possession of the kingdom which has been prepared for you since the foundation of the world* (the crown of all blessings, for this kingdom shall have no end)."

A closer look at the biblical text itself which Francis had in mind provides an opportunity to expand and contemporize the spirituality of Francis as laid out in this fundamental charter for those who would choose to follow his "devout life."

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me..... And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Mt 25:37-43, 46; *New Revised Standard Version*)

Significantly, the text is also central for liberation theologians today.

Indeed, as Jeffrey S. Siker has noted concerning Gustavo Gutiérrez use of the Bible,

from the New Testament, indeed from all of Scripture, the single most important passage for Gutiérrez is clearly Mt 25:31-46, Matthew's famous story about the judgement of the sheep and the goats. Gutiérrez refers to this passage no less than forty-seven times in his writings.... It is not surprising that this passage should play such an important role for Gutiérrez, given that the passage identifies ministry to the poor and oppressed with ministry to Christ, and that such pastoral ministry, the lack thereof, forms the basis for God's eschatological judgment of humanity. Gutiérrez also uses the story to stress God's

call for Christians to be engaged in praxis first and foremost, and for such ministry to be centered primarily on "the least" of the world (25:40,45). Here, among other passages, Gutiérrez finds a locus for "God's preferential option for the poor."⁸

Our initial tendency may be to interpret Philothea's commitment to "the devout life" in an individualistic sense, that Francis is concerned mainly with the individual's conduct in his or her daily existence. With our modern mindset, we would not see any call by Francis in this "Sixth Meditation" to challenge the forces in our world today which are the causes of the poverty, hunger, homelessness, and exploitation described in this famous "judgment" scene. However, there is a commitment to the "commonweal" implied in Francis' understanding of "person" to which we today are blind.

Heredia argues that the modern notion of "person" is a product of the Enlightenment and is often over-psychologized. It stresses the individual, unique and isolated, focused on self and the interior life, unrelated to the world and the persons around us. This psychological interpretation of spirituality

... too easily) tends to turn the Christian vision of human life in upon the human person in a private individualistic way. Holiness is reduced to wholeness and the emphasis on personal growth does not go beyond "my growth, my personality development..... Such self-centeredness can only alienate me from a sense of other-centered service, which is what Christian mission is all about.⁹

This isolated "self"-centered definition of person and spirituality is in contrast to the relational notion of person and spirituality as understood by the world of Francis. A person in Francis' time was defined principally in terms of his or her *relationships* with others husband and wife, parents and children, master and servant, noble and peasant, and so forth. Thus Francis' advice and direction to individuals presumed this wider web of relationship. Heredia, for example, speaks about the "implicitly communitarian and service orientation in the text" of the *Exercises*. He notes about Ignatius that he was born into a world where the organic existence of society was hierarchically structured into its functioning. The imagery used to represent society also reflected this organic unity, where the individual was largely absorbed into the group.¹⁰

Francis de Sales was a part of that same world, and thus the social commitment, the concern for a demands of the wider community, are implied in Francis's address to individuals. With our different understanding of "person" today, we too often misunderstand Francis and overlook this *social commitment* implied in his writings. Thus, the challenge today is to reread, to reinterpret and develop this social commitment implied from the beginning in our tradition. Our modern understanding of the Christian vocation includes the call to challenge the unjust structures and arrangements in the economic, social, and political arenas. Thus we can enter into dialogue with Francis, as it were. We pick up the hints and threads of that implicit social commitment and enlarge and develop them in terms of our commitment to build a just, peaceful, and life-giving human community in our day.

With this background, we return to the "Sixth Meditation" in *the Introduction*, on the Last Judgement. A modern social-justice oriented interpretation of this meditation would then expand the comments of Francis and the description of the sins of which "the wicked" are guilty, "deceitful and wicked looks" or "the pleasure taken in evil conversation." A contemporary, expanded description would include also social sins of indifference to the plight of the oppressed and failure to struggle for more just economic, social, and political structures. Such a description would also encompass sins of racism, sexism, and the waste and misuse of the resources and riches of the natural world. Such a reading does not contradict but carries forward and develops a basic orientation already implicit in the text.

V. Second Example: Chapter Eight of Part Three of the *Introduction* on the Virtue of "Gentleness"

Another text which is open to reinterpretation and development in terms of the social commitment implied in Francis's understanding of the human person comes in the third part of the *Introduction*, in chapter 8 on "gentleness."¹¹ The chapter contains some of the most attractive and memorable passages in the writings of Francis. It has served as a source for many of the "maxims" for which he is famous; for example, "Humility perfects our relationship with God,

gentleness our relationship with our neighbour," and "It is better, then to try to live altogether without anger than endeavour to use it wisely and moderately."

This striving for gentleness, was obviously important for Francis, and he often mentions it and commends it to those who sought his direction and advice. His contemporaries tell us that by nature he was quick-tempered and prone to anger. Thus he countered this tendency in himself by emphasizing this virtue, to such an extent that he has become famous as "the gentleman saint."

But we can go beyond that horizon of the individual person within which this chapter is usually read and interpreted. Even some little knowledge of the world of Francis's day testifies to the widespread violence and cruelty which surrounded him. Besides frequent attacks on individuals and the regular use of torture in jails and prisons, the political rulers regularly engaged in warfare among themselves. Religious conflicts between the Protestant and Catholic parties led to bloodshed and much suffering. Francis's own ruler, the Duke of Savoy, constantly cast an envious eye on the renegade Calvinist stronghold of Geneva. Fear of attack and retaliation by the Calvinist forces was a constant companion of the inhabitants of Annecy and its surroundings.

Against this background and in view of the *social commitment* implicit in Francis' notion of the individual person, one can readily see that it is a mistake to interpret this chapter on gentleness in an individualistic sense. There is clearly scope here for expanding this teaching of Francis on gentleness and making it the basis for a more activist, contemporary understanding of the meaning of Salesian "gentleness." One can see it not in a purely negative sense of an absence of anger, retaliation, and violence. A contemporary spirituality in the Salesian mode would emphasize the positive sense implicit in Francis's teaching on gentleness. Such a reading would see in this chapter the challenge to an active involvement and commitment to *peace*, a *call* to oppose war and militarism and the use of violence in any form against our fellow human beings.

One need only turn to Francis's famous inaugural address when he assumed his office as Provost of the Cathedral Chapter. Rumours filled Annecy of an imminent attack on Geneva by the forces of the Duke of Savoy to return the city and its population to the Catholic faith. Francis also called for an "assult" on Geneva, not an attack with physical attacks, [but a victory obtained through love:

I propose neither steel nor powder; nor will I levy an army of mercenaries with no faith or piety.... Let it be by charity that the walls of Geneva will be breached, by love the city will be invested, by love it will be won over.¹²

The paradoxical nature of the military metaphor, a "conquest" by non-violent means, barely conceals the biting irony in this inaugural address. In his own "gentle" and indirect way, Francis manages to reject the use of force and to expose the pride and arrogance of those who would rely on the weapons of war to attain their ends. He thus provides us with a pattern of "gentleness" in his life and writings for addressing such crucial questions of our day as violence, war, 'militarism, and the production and possession of weapons of mass destruction.

VI. Conclusion

These represent but two examples of the application of our hermeneutical strategy for a liberationist interpretation, of Francis's writings. As we argued above, it does not involve an attempt to turn Francis into a liberation theologian. He responded to the pastoral needs and challenges of his day and has left a body of writings which has guided and nourished countless thousands of souls in their search for God and their efforts to live a life faithful to the gospel ideals.

The emphasis in Francis is clearly on the individual and his or her daily struggles to follow "the devout life." Nonetheless, the challenge of today is different and needs new methods and approaches. There are themes and threads in Francis's texts, as we have shown, which are open to reinterpretation and development. They offer the possibility of a renewed and contemporary Salesian spirituality which can guide and nourish us in meeting the challenges of our day, the challenges above all to oppose the injustices and oppression in the economic, political, and social spheres, the challenge to build a more just and life-giving human community.

End Notes

[1] A number of English translations are currently available. They include those of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales (Bangalore: S.F.S. Publications, 1990 and John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1972). We follow the version by Michael Day (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1955).

[2] George SOARES-PRABHU, S.J., *The Kingdom of God, Jesus' Vision of a New Society* (Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1981), p. 29, as quoted by Mathew Areeparambil, S.J., "A Reinterpretation for Our Times of the Two Standards in the Spiritual Exercises," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections* 62 (1998), p. 464.

[3] Rudolph C. HEREDIA, S.J., "The Need of a New Hermeneutic for the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola," in *The Dharma of Jesus: Interdisciplinary Essays in Memory of George Soares-Prabhu, S.J.* (Edited by Francis X. D'SA, S.J.; Pune: Institute for the Study of Religion; Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1997), p. 292, quoting M. J. O'SULLIVAN, "Towards a Social Hermeneutic of the Spiritual Exercises: An Application to the Annotations," in *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola: Present-Day Applications* (Rome: Cenitum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis, 1982), p. 41.

[4] HEREDIA, "The Need of a New Hermeneutic," p. 289.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*, P. 290. See Paul RICOEUR, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

[7] HEREDIA, "The Need of a New Hermeneutic," 291.

[8] Jeffrey S. SIKER, "Use of the Bible in the Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez: Liberating Scriptures of the Poor," *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 4 (1996), P. 45-6.

[9] HEREDIA, "The Need of a New Hermeneutic," p. 292-3.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 296.

[11] "Gentleness Toward Our Neighbour and Remedies for Anger," as the expanded title in the translation by the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales describes it.

[12] See E.J. Lajuenie, O.P., *St. Francis de Sales: The Man The Thinker, His Influence* (Translated by Rory O'Sullivan, O.S.F.S.; Bangalore: S.F.S. Publications, 1986), vol. 1, p. 150.
