



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

ANTHONY R. CERESKO, O.S.F.S.

### “*Salesian Simplicity*”

---

originally published in

*Salesian Living Heritage*

(1989): 16-28

---

In this paper I will develop some reflections on the Salesian virtue of simplicity by contrasting simplicity with complexity, the complexity of modern life and of the world in which we live, the complexity of the world out of which our Scriptures came, particularly the world of Amos, and the world of St. Francis de Sales. I shall move, then, toward my own understanding of the virtue of simplicity, of the Salesian virtue of simplicity, and developing it particularly as a way of overcoming these complexities which we face and as a way of bringing God into the picture of our lives and allowing the light of faith to shine on and illuminate our every action.

First of all, the complexity of modern life and the world in which we live. I will alert you right from the beginning that I do not take a benign or simplistic or neutral view of our Western modern culture. Like any product of human effort, indeed, it is touched by grace, but sin and selfishness and pride mark some of it. And thus my outlook and view of our modern Western (north Atlantic) culture has been profoundly affected by the Latin American Liberation Theology, and by the "Option for the Poor," which has become in recent years, an interpretive perspective more and more central to the Catholic Church's official teachings and approach to contemporary issues. This is witnessed to by Pope John Paul II's encyclical published a year ago March on social concerns, *Sollicitudo Rei Sociales*. If I tend to stress the negative, it is by way of counteracting the lethargy and false security we so easily fall into as a result of the concerted media campaign to which we are subjected from all sides, the consumerist value system which has such a tenacious hold on our society and which presents itself as the way to salvation and happiness not only for us but for all of humankind.

One of the advantages of living in Canada for the last eleven years has been the confrontation with alternative ways available of organizing our society's economic arrangements, for example. Two parties tend to dominate Canadian politics: the Progressive Conservatives, who presently control the Canadian Parliament, and the Liberal Party. However, there also exists a minority socialist group, the New Democratic Party or N.D.P., which has a long and respected history in Canadian politics and which has had, despite its small size, a marked effect in humanizing Canadian society. For example, it was principally due to the influence of this party that Canada now has a universal health care system, in which every person now has access to modern medical care either free or at a modest fee. And thus when the Social Affairs Committee of the Canadian Bishop's Conference issued a statement on the Canadian commerce seven years ago, they could ask much more fundamental questions about the justice of a capitalist or so-called free-market economic system that could their American colleagues in their recent Bishop's statement on the American economy.

That is understandable, I think, in a country like the United States in which the media has in some ways been turned into an effective tool by the large corporations that largely control that media and use it to manipulate the life style and habits of a huge American public and beyond. Such corporations have not and, I believe, would not allow any questioning of the dogma that free enterprise and the free-market system are the way to salvation and happiness not only for the American people but for the whole of humanity.

Enter John Paul II and his recent encyclical. In that encyclical he raised fundamental questions and challenges about the justice of liberal capitalism as a way of organizing a society and the world's economic life. He puts Western capitalism and the East bloc form of communism on the same plane and is even-handedly and harshly critical of both. I have a couple quotations:

Each of the two blocs (East and West) harbors in its own way a tendency toward imperialism, as it is usually called, or toward forms of neo-colonialism. It is this abnormal situation, the result of an unacceptably exaggerated concern for national security, which deadens the impulse toward united cooperation by all for the common good of the human race and to the detriment especially of peaceful peoples who are impeded, then, from rightful access to the goods meant for all.

The Pope continues:

Seen in this way, the present division of the world into East and West is a direct obstacle to the real transformation of the developing and less advanced countries.

In other words, the present division into East and West, communism versus capitalism, is, according to the Pope, an artificial one, promoted by the power centers on each side to provide easy excuses, for example, for the United States to continue running our economy on a wartime basis and spend unjustifiable amounts on weapons and weapons research. The real conflict, the Pope suggests, the one involving the day to day lives and health and well-being, the one involving the malnutrition, starvation, and death of millions of human beings, is the North-South conflict, the conflict between the one-quarter of humanity that controls and often misuses or wastes four-fifths of the world's income every year and the three-quarters of humanity—three

billion, three thousand million human beings who are expected to survive on the remaining one-fifth of that wealth as income. And the irony is our economy is not really a free-market one, based on supply and demand, but a command economy. Often needs are created and a population manipulated through a controlled media for the profit and power of those who manage the media.

We know that we are sometimes directly or indirectly involved in the economic structures and arrangements in which were institutionalized and rendered permanent the sin and selfishness of individuals or of groups in the past. Indeed, every time we put down sixty-five cents on the counter for a cup of coffee, we are involving ourselves indirectly by lending our support to a whole web of forces that have effectively enslaved farmers in South America, forcing them to use substantial amounts of their precious land to grow coffee beans rather than to produce the food which would ensure healthy and adequate diet for the farming families rather than mere subsistence ones.

Let us consider the complexity of life for the people of the Old Testament. Life today is, indeed complex, but it parallels the problems and issues faced by the people living in ancient Israel. Let's take a look at that complexity as it manifested itself during the times of the prophet Amos. We will see in similarity to our own day, that economic issues and questions loomed large for Amos and for the people to whom he preached. As in our day, economics did not involve only theories and abstract systems, but the stuff of everyday life, and the very things upon which we depend for our survival—food, shelter, clothing, work, health. These are not merely theoretical questions, but issues that touch the day to day lives of every human being.

Many recent studies on the Old Testament have stressed the social, political, and economic background of the origin of Israel's expression of its faith as we find it embodied in the documents of the Old Testament. The way Israel came to understand and express who their God is and what their God is and what their God had done for them was not simply dropped from heaven full blown into the lap of Moses or anyone else. Israel's faith was born out of and shaped by the day to day struggle to form and maintain a just and life-giving community, just and life-giving in all its aspects—economic, social, political, religious. These were all intimately bound together as indeed they are in our own lives today. In its origins, Israel's community was basically an egalitarian one, or at least one with an opening towards equality. Its economic and political organization was developed in such a way as to impede and discourage the accumulation of wealth and/or power in the hands of a few individuals or groups. This way of organizing their society formed a sharp contrast with the Canaanite society which was hierarchical and socially stratified, divided into a small minority ruling class on the one hand and the majority of ruled people on the other. The ruling class comprised less than five per cent of the population in the Canaanite population. Yet they controlled more than half the goods produced in that society. The other ninety per cent or so of the population worked the land as tenants, paid heavy taxes in produce and forced labor, and received only the barest subsistence necessary to remain productive. Early Israel, on the other hand, formed a contrast to this way of organizing life. The Israelites worked toward building a non-stratified society, and one of its foundation stones, one of its key elements was an economic system which insured approximately equal access for all of its members to basic resources and especially to land, in contrast to the concentration of control of these resources and that land in the hands of a few individuals or

groups, for example, the king and his courtiers. This is why Israel's covenant with Yahweh, as one reads of it in the Old Testament, is concerned so much with social and economic matters, laws and customs and regulations which seem at first to have nothing to do with religious or spiritual matters.

This is a clue as to how I will define and understand simplicity: holding together in one unique though tensive act the sacred and the so-called secular, the religious and the worldly, the spiritual (inner) and the material (outer). Separating the real outer social world which we inhabit with its economic, political, and social arrangements from the inner spiritual world is artificial and unreal. The two are inseparable. And thus Israel's covenant with God, that fundamental charter that formed the basis of their life in community together and in communion with God took into account not only their communal worship and their personal commitment and devotion to Yahweh; it concerned the whole gamut of the life of that people together. Their love of and loyalty to Yahweh was bound up with the just ordering of the economic, political, and social arrangements within their community. Israel's origins, its covenant, and original egalitarian social structure go back to the twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C.

By the time of Amos in the eighth century, three hundred years had passed. In the meantime, under the pressure of the Philistine threat, Israel had crossed a fateful line from a tribal confederation to a monarchy under David and his successors. With the coming of the monarchy came also the possibility of a social stratification. A tiny powerful rich ruling class, with the large majority of people under their rule and control. With a benign king like David or Josiah or Hezekiah, such a society could still function under the inspiration of the values and spirit of the covenant with Yahweh. But the way was open and all too easy to follow for those in positions of power to use those positions for their own selfish ends, to enrich themselves at the expense of the weak and powerless. And by Amos' time, that exploitation was obviously in high gear. In Amos' mind, a line had been crossed. Exploitation and injustice were so rampant that the hope of this society as a living and life-giving society had died. Thus Amos pronounced Yahweh's judgment upon that society that it was doomed to end, doomed to destruction. The prophet gave the reasons why the sentence of death was being passed and about to be carried out: those in positions of power, the ruling elite, cared only for themselves. The king and his counselors, the priests in the Temple, the nobles in the court, the rich merchants who carried on the trade for the king, these all wasted the surpluses they had extorted from the poor farmers and the sheep-herding majority. They wasted it on a lavish lifestyle: sumptuous townhouses and villas, ivory-inlaid furniture, costly wines, expensive perfumes, drunken feasts. All of these abuses are vividly described in Amos' oracles. And the powerful used their extorted wealth to maintain a professional military force with large units of cavalry and chariots, both to impose their rule upon the majority and to take full part in the international politics of the time. They tried to play off one power against another, (e.g., Egypt against Syria) in order to maintain a degree of independence so that they could continue to have a free hand with their control over and exploitation of the population of their own country. In its primitive original form, Amos' announcement of judgment takes the form of a cry, a shout, a protest from the midst of pain and suffering. It contains no program for reform nor even does it call for a *metanoia*—a change of heart. His preaching can be reduced to one concern—social and economic justice. This is not a new insight, but what may surprise some is that it is his only concern. Amos says, "Thus says Yahweh." These are not Amos' words, he claims, but the words of God. Amos implies that the

situation against which he is crying goes against the very nature and fabric of human life as Yahweh created and willed it.

Later generations would re-use and re-work the oracles of Amos, add motives for hope, and turn his protests into calls for conversion. But these later generations also preserved Amos' powerful and stinging indictments of the society of his day, because his words and insights so clearly revealed the sources of those injustices and of the eventual disaster which would and did overtake Amos' society and Amos' world. The sources were two, but they were intimately connected. The one was the sinfulness of the human heart, the selfishness and greed and blindness of the ruling classes of Amos' day. The other source was human sinfulness externalized and institutionalized in the unjust economic and political arrangements of the society of Amos' day. Those economic and political arrangements not only preserved and continued the sins of the past—the selfishness and greed of previous generations; the arrangements also facilitated and allowed—even encouraged at times—the sins of the present. These arrangements invited and were in some sense responsible for the greed and selfishness and blindness that continued among Amos' contemporaries. One can see, then, that the kind of call to conversion contained in the later editions of Amos' prophecies unites in a single perspective a call to an interior change of heart, but at the same time a call to an exterior change of the conditions which foster, facilitate, and help to encourage the sin in which that heart is involved.

We turn now to the complexity in the life of St. Francis de Sales. During this past year, I had the opportunity to read through the recent English translation of Lajeunie's life of St. Francis de Sales, and I was struck by how immersed Francis was in the political, economic, and social issues of his day. We have a tendency to ignore the fact that every time Francis affixed his signature to a document, the signature read "Francis, Prince and Bishop of Geneva." He was potentially a secular ruler, and even though deprived at the moment of those secular powers and functions, he still exercised a considerable amount of secular authority over the disposal of properties and incomes and offices. And when one reads his life, one sees him actively engaged in building a more just and peaceful world for his day. He did this in his letters, in his travels, in the political negotiations that he was asked to undertake by his Prince, in his fighting for just salaries for his priests in parishes, in his reform of the monasteries in his Diocese. We see Francis struggling, sometimes for years, to reform or to close these places of scandal so that the incomes on which they survived could be returned to their proper use—the support of the priests and needy parishes of the Diocese. The great faith of Francis, his love of God and neighbor, his humility and gentleness informed all these actions which had an impact for the good on the society of his day, both upon individuals as well as upon institutions and structures.

In looking over the life and writings of Francis to see what role the virtue of simplicity played, how it fits into his understanding and description of the living of the Christian life, I was not struck by his explicit treatments of it. What stood out for me was the simplicity implicit in his understanding and description of how one lives the Christian life, a simplicity in practice which can be seen and described in the very act of being a Christian. There is a simplicity for Francis in the very dynamics of Living Jesus. Simplicity for Francis comes about in unifying of the exterior and interior in a human action that initiates with our intellect and our will and issues in some exterior effect. Thus the God to whom we are attracted, the God whom we come to desire and to love in our interior prayer, can only be loved by some action which touches, which

involves, which causes a change in the exterior world in which we live. The love of God is conceived in the heart through prayer and the Holy Spirit. But that attraction, that moment, that first movement will die and not truly be love unless that love conceived in the heart finally comes to birth in the exterior, in action. The oneness, the unity of that movement from the interior to the exterior, that unity toward which Francis aimed in his own life, that unity which he taught to others is for me the heart and genius of the simplicity that marks Salesian spirituality.

We see that essential link for Francis in his description of meditation or discursive prayer in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. The whole process concludes in a resolution. It moves from the interior to the exterior. It issues in action—in the effort to practice some virtue, in the attitude or comportment toward another individual, in the effort to avoid certain ways of acting. Even with regard to the higher states of prayer the test for Francis, the touchstone of authenticity, was always the question of the effect that this way of praying has on the life we live. If it makes us better persons, if we are more loving, more gentle, more patient, more tolerant and accepting, if it leads us to good actions such as works for justice, for helping the poor, for alleviating human suffering or strife, that was a sign for Francis of the prayer's genuineness.

Finally we come to simplicity in our lives today. The notion of simplicity I wish to stress, then, is not so much that which we find in the more explicit treatments of the virtue of Francis. I wish to stress the simplicity, the singleness, the unicity of intention/action implicit in Francis' description and understanding of the praxis of Christianity. Simplicity is the name we give to that quality of oneness or unicity that characterizes the dynamic of a movement under grace, a movement from an interior recognition of an action to be done to the exterior achievement or carrying out of that action. The one God is present in the individual's recognition of that act to be done; that same God is present in the life and fabric of the society where that action will have its effect, and the same God is present in the passage from the interior to the exterior as God guides and motivates that passage. The quality of unicity or oneness we may call the virtue of simplicity, the singleheartedness of choosing under the influence of God's grace, and the carrying out of that choice. This virtue of simplicity reflects in some sense the very oneness and uniqueness of the God we worship. Israel cries out in Deuteronomy 6:4 "Behold, O Israel, Yahweh your God is the unique, the one, the undivided!"

In our day, it seems to me, a new dimension is being added to the call to live a Christian life. This dimension is the result of the changing circumstances in our world. And I see at least two elements in these changing circumstances. One is the phenomenon which often goes by the name of the global village. Marshall McLuhan recognized almost thirty years ago, that modern communications are effecting a revolution in the way we view ourselves in our modern world. Barriers of space and time have been shattered and we are in almost instant contact with places all over the globe. Further, the increasing size and influence of networks of power and control over the world's economy are obvious and frightening in the creation and growth of the so-called multi-national corporations over the last quarter century. Thus, we find ourselves linked not only by communications networks, but by an increasingly complicated web of economic lines with most of the other human beings on our planet. A second element in the changing circumstances on our planet is this consciousness, this exploitation of ideology. It amounts to the ability by those in power to manipulate belief or value systems, not for good, but rather to insure and enhance influence and power.

I described earlier the almost staggering complexity and the almost frightening problems of institutionalized injustice in our world today. Previous generations have tended to privatize religion. They saw faith as belonging to their own little sphere of existence and having nothing to do with the larger world in which they lived—its economic, political, and social arrangements.

On the surface, at least, St. Francis de Sales seems simply to take the arrangements, the structures, the institutions of the society and Church of his day, for granted. They were given for him, and he was not about to propose changing them in any fundamental way. He simply accepted them as they were and attempted to live as best he could within those limits the structures imposed.

Today, however, we are much more aware of the historical character of the social, economic, political, and religious institutions in which we live. They are not necessarily givens. They were not created by God nor are they immutable. They were created by and continue to be supported by, modified by, manipulated by human beings, and thus are capable of being changed by human beings. Nor are these institutions morally neutral. As products of human intellect and will, they also incarnate the good and evil, the virtue and vice of those responsible for them. And this is the meaning of social sin which is only now being recognized and addressed by Church teaching. This concept of social sin is something new for many of us, difficult to understand and more difficult to cope with and address. How do I deal with the sin which I am involved in by the very act of buying what my family needs to clothe, and feed, and shelter itself? The other day I picked up a box of floppy discs I had just bought to use in my computer, and I noticed on the back of one of the floppy discs: "Assembled in Mexico," in other words, in one of the factories of the so-called free-trade zones built along the border of the United States and Mexico, built there in order to exploit the cheap Mexican labor.

For me, the very first step has been the Option for the Poor which I am attempting to make a reality in my life. And I found that this option for the poor is not just a onetime act or choice. I have found that it is a whole process, a type of religious and spiritual conversion. And like any conversion, it proceeds in fits and starts and stages over time and undergoes gradually a deepening of understanding and commitment. This gradual process of understanding and making commitment to the Option for the Poor has affected my teaching and preaching. It led me, last year, to spend five months in India teaching in a seminary in the south of that country, and it is, in good part, responsible for my talking to you here today on this topic of simplicity.

One day in India last fall the realization came over me that after some forty years of life I had at last, in a real sense, joined the human race. In India, by sharing even in some remote way the life, the joys and sorrows, the problems and difficulties of this people in a Third World country, I finally had some more concrete idea of what it really means to be a human being on this planet. The life I had enjoyed up until that moment was the kind of life enjoyed only by a privileged minority of the human race. I had been a North American, a Westerner, and, especially, a white, male, well-educated individual. There in India I was seeing and joining in life as it is lived by the vast majority of our human family. When one opts to make oneself a member of that majority, the world begins to look very different. The free enterprise or capitalistic system hailed by many as the way to salvation for our world takes on from the view of those who are its victims, those who are the pawns in the scramble for wealth and power, the look of a system which does not

promise life or produce prosperity. The system appears rather as a cynical and cruel mechanism for exploitation which has been responsible for enslavement and suffering and death. Our country is seen as a major player in a global game with other economic powers for control and exploitation of the markets and resources of already poor nations, for channeling those resources, human and material, into its economic machine. This view of our world from its underside, from the point of view of those at the bottom of the heap, was a difficult one for me to understand and accept. But I am becoming more and more convinced that it is the view that I, as a follower of Jesus, who came to preach good news to the poor, must take in order to understand the meaning and power of that good news. “Blessed are you poor; yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now; you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now; for you shall laugh.”

Now I begin to comprehend what motivated and informed the impassioned words of Amos in his preaching. I begin to understand how Francis moved from inner desire to outer action in a single pulse. I see that our actions must not only include changes for the better in our personal way of life, our own growth in holiness, our acquiring of virtue. And we must not stop with simple good works that touch directly and personally our neighbor, alleviating their suffering, comforting them in sorrow, bringing them closer to God—no matter how important these works are. Often there are economic, social, political arrangements which have institutionalized past human sinfulness and continue the effects of that sinfulness to cause suffering and death, and lead people to continue to sin. These arrangements make it easier, indeed, sometimes rewarding to act in sinful ways and thus be led away from God. Our activity, our goal as Christians, must also include reforming, or even fundamentally changing those economic, social, and political arrangements in which we ourselves participate and/or have the power to influence or effect.

The virtue of simplicity thus leads me to enlarge my vision of what I am doing when I try to act as a follower of Jesus. When I strive to “Live Jesus,” I am led to include, as a matter of habit, the intention not only to do good to my neighbor directly, but also to reform or even change those ways our community, our society works—its structures. I must work to alter those institutions that impede me and others from doing good and which sometimes even force us to do what is objectively evil.

The unity of God is reflected in the simplicity of my Christian life as my actions move from interior resolution to exterior effectiveness. That unity of the God who is the source of all in existence is thus reflected more fully in activity which includes a wider scope. I have already mentioned some of the ways this Option for the Poor has affected my own attempts to live as a follower of Jesus and influenced my preaching and teaching. My attitude toward the society in which I live has become more critical. I can no longer watch commercials on television or look at them in magazines without feeling a sense of repugnance for the slick and cynical distortions and manipulations of some of the most fundamental drives deep within our hearts—the desire for happiness, for fulfillment, the desire for love and acceptance. “Own this new car and everyone will automatically love and respect you.” “Satisfy that desire, deep in your heart, for that which is beyond the purely material, by eating this food, or drinking this soft drink, or owning this house.” And when I watch or listen to the news, I try to read between the lines and look beyond the conventional and often interpretive language used to communicate it.

When I speak with my family or friends or confreres about such issues, some of them express a resigned and almost fatalistic attitude toward these issues. “These problems are too big for me. I can’t do anything about them. So why even think about them? It’s always been this way. The rich get richer; the poor get poorer; we can’t change that. Revolution only determines who the rich are and who the poor are in the next round of an unending cycle. I just get depressed when I think of all this.”

My answer is: Those who do not wish things to change welcome such an attitude of resignation and skepticism. Such persons want us to think that things cannot change, that our institutions, economic, political, and social arrangements are givens, and we can’t do anything about them. Such a fatalistic attitude insures that change will never come. When I view the problems of our world, I no longer become resigned or depressed. I have come to realize that it is exactly here, at this point, that the power of the hope and promise of the Gospel, of the kingdom of God is felt most acutely. Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God was not a totally other-worldly one, but a vision which began with the problems and possibilities he faced in the real world of his own day, this world in which we live. His kingdom, though it would reach its fullness in the next world, begins here and now in this world, and only insofar as we live as if that kingdom is already in the age to come.

In his encyclical on social concerns of March 1988, Pope John Paul II is highly critical of the two ideological systems which are competing to dominate the economic, political, and social arrangements of the entire planet—liberal capitalism on the one hand, and Soviet style of communism on the other. And he invites us to begin to imagine and work toward a more just and equitable and peaceful way of ordering our lives and our societies. There must be a better way. There are better ways. The Pope offers us a vision of a world bound together in solidarity, recognizing the cooperative interdependence which is and will be necessary if we are to survive as a race. Solidarity—a new name for love.

In listening to the tapes of last August’s conference on Salesian Spirituality, I was struck by Robert Mueller’s description of meditation and the role which imagination plays in our prayer. In prayer our imagination allows us to see that for which we pray. In the act of praying and imagining, we take the first steps toward giving reality to that for which we pray. It begins to come to be in our prayer. If we are able to pray for, to begin to imagine in our prayer, the economic, political, and social arrangements that would insure a more just and equitable distribution of the abundance of this planet, a world in which people have renounced war and the use of force to attain their goals, a world in which human beings respect and reverence the physical environment they find themselves in, rather than exploit and destroy it, a world in which people are encouraged to celebrate and share this earth’s bountiful fertility, rather than possess and control it themselves, if we can imagine such a world and how it can be achieved, we can begin to take those first steps in creating such a world. It has already begun to come into existence in and through us. And this is not purely a secular vision even though it may be one that we share with many who are non-Christians. What we are envisioning would be the kingdom of God, that is, a world ruled by God, in and through us, not just a reality limited to life after death, beyond this world, but already present here and now in its beginnings in our midst. This was the vision which inspired and sustained Jesus as he proclaimed the inauguration of that kingdom in his very person and preaching. It was because of this vision, fundamentally at odds

with the economic, political and religious arrangements of his time, that he died. And it was for this final triumph and realization of that vision which he taught us to pray each day with the simple and trusting hearts of children: "Father in heaven, may your name be held holy; may your kingdom come. Amen."

---