



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

**MOST REV. LEWIS FIORELLI, O.S.F.S.**

*“Let us join our life to God’s love”*

*A Christian Humanist Education*

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*address on the occasion of the  
DeSales University Commencement  
May 18, 2002*

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### GREETINGS

Mr. Gerald White, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of DeSales University, Father Bernard O’Connor, President of DeSales University, my fellow honorees, Mother Françoise-Isabelle Stiegler and Attorney James Cusimano, distinguished members of the faculty, parents, spouses and friends of the graduating class of 2002 -- and you, the members of the graduating class of 2002, I am delighted to be with you today and to speak on this happy occasion.

In late November, 2001, many members of both Oblate Congregations gathered in Rome to participate in the canonization of St. Léonie Frances de Sales Aviat. Together with Father Louis Brisson, St. Léonie founded the Congregation of the Oblates Sisters of St. Francis de Sales whose Superior General, Mother Françoise-Isabelle, is honoring us with her presence today. A student in the Visitation Academy of Troyes, France, St. Léonie had been nourished upon Salesian spirituality from her earliest years. That same spirituality gives this University its special character. It is for these reasons that I would like to speak to you today about education from the perspective of Salesian spirituality. Although my words are rooted in Catholic and Salesian traditions, it is my hope that they will speak to the life experience of all of you, regardless of your particular religious affiliation.

## INTRODUCTION

You, the graduates of 2002, are about to enter a world which is very different from the one which existed before September 11, 2001. It is now a world of suicide bombers and sleeper cells; a world at war on many fronts and divided in many ways. The Catholic Church --to which many of us look for moral guidance in an uncertain world-- is today itself in the midst of a crisis of trust. In our Western world, moral relativism continues to join forces with unbridled materialism and compulsive consumerism. Of more immediate interest to you who are about to enter the work force, the economic picture, though brighter than a few months ago, is not yet rosy, nor is the job market robust.

This is the world which awaits you. How has De Sales University prepared you to enter this world and to make your way through it not only as successful human beings but as men and women of character whose "lives of virtue" will transform it into a better and more noble place? That is the question which my reflections address today.

This university proudly bears the name of "De Sales" and its mission is to foster his special spirit. St. Francis de Sales was an early 17<sup>th</sup> century bishop. He was a successful missionary, noted spiritual guide and celebrated author. With St. Jane de Chantal, he is the Founder of the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary.

Of particular interest to us this morning, he was one of the seminal thinkers whose genius gave birth and direction to a movement of thought and life which has come to be known as Christian humanism. One of the principal goals of De Sales University is to educate and form men and women in the tradition of Christian humanism and, in doing so, to prepare them well for success in both life and work in today's world.

Christian humanism is, fundamentally, an approach to the human family which is based on a deep respect, even reverence, for each human person and a joyful affirmation of the goodness and potential of this world. Created according to the divine image, each person comes from God and is destined for lasting union with God. This is sufficient reason for us to love, reverence, and serve each person and to work with energy and zeal for the peace, justice and betterment of the entire human family. Further, it is reason enough to treasure all of creation and to shepherd it with intelligent and caring stewardship. Christian humanism finds in the person of Jesus and in his double relationship of love for God and neighbor the model and paradigm for all human behavior.

A well-known saying of St. Francis de Sales sums up well his understanding of Christian humanism: "Let us join our life to God's Love." After looking at that saying and how it speaks to an education which is guided by the spirit of Christian humanism, I will conclude my remarks with a brief reflection on the Saint's celebrated characterization of education as the eighth sacrament.

## "LET US JOIN OUR LIFE TO GOD'S LOVE"

(Book 12, chapter 9 of the Treatise on the Love of God)

"Let us join our life to God's love." Francis de Sales penned this expression at the end of his spiritual masterpiece, the Treatise on the Love of God. Despite its challenging title and a few chapters of heavy philosophical musings, the Treatise is really just an early 17<sup>th</sup> century "How to" book. We are all familiar with that kind of book. They teach us everything from how to build a house to how to rebuild a relationship, from how to bake a cake to how to build a space ship. The Treatise on the Love of God teaches its readers "how to" love God above all things by learning how to embrace the divine will in all things, but especially in their every day lives.

Francis de Sales teaches his readers that God's will is accomplished when, following the example of Jesus, they bring every relationship and every human project into alignment with what God desires for them. They are taught, first of all, to respect the unique and special person which each of them is and to bring their potential to perfection. For the Christian humanist, the saint is, first and foremost, the fully actualized human person. It is for this reason that St. Francis de Sales challenges us to "be who we are and to be that well!" We are also taught to recognize and respect a similar dignity and a like challenge in every other person.

This has implications for every day life as well as for every human relationship. For the Christian humanist, to be human is at the same time the invitation to find a divine depth in ourselves and in others. It is a call to bless God for each new friend and for every happy moment, and to welcome each new day, with its work, its play, even its pain, as the arena in which we practice virtue, reach out in caring support to those we love, and extend our hands to those in need. Every smile and each tear invites a response from us which is both human and divine. In short, because God has taken on flesh in Christ, nothing human falls beyond the reach of the holy. Francis de Sales is a lasting champion of that truth and has made it a foundation of his spirit.

Therefore, never underestimate your dignity as God's creation. Never short change your uniqueness as his special handiwork. And treat all others in a similar fashion. In brief, fulfill the challenge of your education as Christian humanists to "Be who you are and [to] be that well. In doing so, you will honor the Master Craftsman whose handiwork you are."

Given our focus today, we can ask, "How does the saint's challenge to join our life to God's love shape the experience of education?" Specifically, "How does De Sales University accomplish this task from the perspective of Christian humanism?" It does so, I believe, in many ways but principally by teaching its students to appreciate the important linkage between faith and reason, between one's belief system and one's daily life. Let me explain.

You are about to graduate. That means that you have spent years mastering the fundamentals of a liberal education as well as the sometimes arcane realms of your particular discipline. Following the principles of Christian humanism, De Sales University has encouraged you to pursue those studies as both believers and thinkers. Many academic institutions pride themselves on separating study from faith, assuring their students that they must choose between a belief system, with its ethical demands on behavior and life, and an unfettered search for scientific truth. This University holds the opposite view. Since God is the Creator, the truths of faith are

always, fundamentally, one with the truths of science. They originate from the same Source and tend towards a common Goal. Its students are therefore encouraged to be both men and women of faith as well as serious thinkers. They are taught that faith is never an enemy of learning, nor is it frightened by the light of any truth. Both faith and knowledge are, on the contrary, to be pursued with equal zeal and energy; both are to be placed at the service of others.

Thus, faith and reason, long placed on separate and parallel paths by Rationalism, are joined in the study and life of the Christian humanist whose view of God and creation is a seamless garment. In that view, faith joins, hand in hand, with reason; theory gives shape and direction to practice; and belief rolls up its sleeves to work for the betterment of the world. The believer cultivates a prayerful relationship with God while living lovingly with others. The believer works to bring about a lasting peace rooted in justice, and is a strong advocate of the poor and disenfranchised. Finally, the believer is a responsible and caring steward of creation, treating it with deep respect, even with a kind of reverence as befits its relationship to the Creator.

So, in addition to helping you to master the skills and knowledge with which you will earn your livelihood in satisfying and fulfilling careers, De Sales University has also prepared you to let your faith shape your lives and inform your knowledge while placing both at the service of this troubled and broken world. It doing so, it has educated both your head and your heart. And, in doing that, it has been faithful to the spirit of Christian humanism.

### **EDUCATION: THE EIGHTH SACRAMENT**

As a post-conciliar bishop, one of the principal tasks of Francis de Sales was to implement the decrees of the Council of Trent which had met over many years to address the concerns and challenges of the Reformation. He was convinced that an ignorant and superstitious Catholic clergy had contributed to the ecclesial abuses which had then inflamed the disdain of the Reformers for many of the teachings and practices of the Church. He was convinced that henceforth not only must priests be holy, they must be thoroughly educated as well. Only in that way could they experience themselves and teach to others the intimate relationship between faith and life. It was in this context that he uttered his famous dictum: For the priest, education is the eighth Sacrament!

I suggest that the truth of that statement includes all of you who are about to graduate. For you, too, learning must be the eighth sacrament. I think I can read your thoughts, "You're a little late. We are at the end of our formal studies." It's true that for many of you, the formal years of education will end today. But I urge you, in the spirit of this saying, to let wonder, learning, reading and discovery be a part of all the years which lie before you.

During those years, delve ever more deeply into your faith, whatever it may be. Embrace that faith as an adult. St. Peter used to urge the early Christians to be prepared to defend what they believe and hope: "Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours," he writes, "be ever ready to reply." (1 Peter 3:15) You ought to be able to do the same, not only by the quality of your lives but also by your readiness to articulate an adult understanding of your faith. After all, you are the Church. Be that well!

Learn, too, what it means to be a good citizen of your community, of your country and of the world. Be an active participant in the currents that will shape the years ahead. To the fullest extent of both your talents and energy, direct those currents according to the principles of Christian humanism by affirming the dignity and worth of each human person no matter their social status, creed, gender or natural gifts. Be advocates for a peace rooted in justice. Work hard to bring about structures in the work place, in politics, in economics and in all others arenas of life which create a level playing field for all nations and every person.

Formal learning may be indeed be about to end, but "learning for faith and life" --which is the goal of Christian humanism-- has only just begun! Make it your eighth Sacrament!

### **PRAYER**

I believe strongly in the power of prayer. Therefore, for the past several weeks I have prayed each day for all of you who are about to graduate from De Sales University. My prayer has been a simple one. "May God who has sewn the good which is in each of you, especially during these years at De Sales University, may He Himself, in the years which lie before you, bring that good to perfection. Once perfected, may that good transform the world in small and large ways so that what you leave behind may be a far better and more worthy place for all who follow."

Graduates of 2002, join your life to God's love. Be who are and be that well! You are our pride and our hope!

Congratulations! May God bless each of you!

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