



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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### *Spiritual Friendship*

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St. Francis de Sales is perhaps the earliest—he is certainly one of the best—champions of the universal call to holiness, no matter one’s vocational state in life or natural temperament. He is also convinced that the means to holiness are immediately at hand in the Church’s sacraments, prayer and one’s robust practice of virtue. He teaches much on the practice of virtue. Indeed, for him, each person’s vocational state in life, with its duties and responsibilities, is the privileged location of the divine will for that person as well as the principal arena for the choice and practice of virtue.

We are familiar with the Salesian emphasis on “the little virtues.” They are the relational virtues of everyday life such as charity, gentleness, compassion and kindness. Less familiar, perhaps is the role that St. Francis de Sales gives to the relational virtue of what he calls true or spiritual friendship. The chaste, warm and affectionate friendship that he enjoyed with St. Jane de Chantal is celebrated in the annals of Christian spirituality. Coupled with their common dedication to a ready observance of the double commandment of love, their special friendship with one another greatly assisted them in becoming not only fully actualized human persons but great saints as well. It is important to appreciate that, in the Salesian tradition, their experience of spiritual friendship is meant to be the norm, not the exception.<sup>1</sup>

In the years before us, the members of the Congregation will likely continue to experience an ever-closer association with the laity. For this reason, the place and practice of spiritual

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[1] For a thorough and very readable treatment of this celebrated spiritual friendship, see Wendy M. Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal & Francois de Sales* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985).

friendship will doubtless become increasingly more prominent among us. It is for this reason that I would like to reflect on the virtue of spiritual friendship in this twenty-first edition of the General's News.

Many have suggested that the third millennium will be the age of the Holy Spirit. Others have suggested that it will be the age of the Laity. In the practice of spiritual friendship, I believe that it will be both.

### ***The Introduction and Spiritual Friendship***

*The Introduction to the Devout Life* is, we know, principally a guide for the layperson's quest for holiness—precisely as a layperson. In the forty-one chapters of Part III of that masterful work, St. Francis de Sales treats of a number of virtues that are especially helpful in one's pursuit of the devout life. Six of those chapters deal with friendship (17-22). Francis treats of several types of "friendship," including what he calls vain, evil, and frivolous friendships as well as "fond loves," the 17<sup>th</sup> century version of courtly love. But the principal focus of those chapters—as well as ours here—is his insightful reflections on what he calls "true friendships."

In Chapter 17, St. Francis de Sales reminds his reader of the three characteristics of any friendship. Friendship must be mutual. The friends must be aware of their friendship for one another. And there must be communication between them. The character of communication is what defines the several types of friendship. If, for instance, the communication between friends is false and empty, so too will be their friendship. The better, the nobler, the content of their communication, the nobler or truer will be the friendship between them.

Chapter 19 is entitled, "True Friendship." He begins that chapter with the reminder that as Christians we are to love everyone, even our enemies. But as for friends, especially spiritual friends, we are advised to form them only with those with whom we can share "virtuous things." The greater or more noble the virtuous things shared, the more perfect will the friendship be. In ascending order, Francis speaks of the kinds of virtuous things he has in mind. The friendship between those who exchange knowledge or truth is a praiseworthy one. When what is shared between them is the practice of virtue such as prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice, the friendship is even more praiseworthy. When what is shared relates to charity, devotion and Christian perfection, "O God, how precious this friendship will be!" That friendship is an excellent one, excellent because its source is God; and excellent because it assists those who share it to attain life's goal which is lasting happiness with God. Francis emphasizes that the bonds of friendship that are forged here will last forever. "How good it is to love here on earth as they love in heaven and to learn to cherish one another in this world as we shall do eternally in the next!" Only this kind of friendship is worthy of being called "spiritual friendship." In its exercise, the friends "share with one another their devotion and spiritual affections." Doing so, they forge "a single spirit" and share but one heart.

Let us reflect a bit on what Francis says about the nature of spiritual friendship in this chapter. He agrees wholeheartedly with St. Thomas Aquinas that spiritual friendship is a virtue. By definition a virtue strengthens the character of believers to more readily and better fulfill their responsibilities as Christians, especially regarding the example and teachings of Christ as well as

the precepts of the Church. Virtues enable those who practice them to translate their faith more easily, readily and concretely into what Francis calls “life and action.” That is, they help them to better fulfill the double commandment of love.

In this same chapter, Francis expands on the implications of spiritual friendship as a Christian virtue. In affirming, for example, that God is both its source as well as its goal, he is assuring us that our spiritual friends are a special grace from God to us. They make our life’s journey a more pleasant experience and assist us to more easily attain life’s goal, lasting happiness with God. Further, our friendship with them will last forever.

The lasting character of spiritual friendship has many implications. Think of what this means, for example, for married couples who are also spiritual friends. Their beautiful bond of marriage, even when sanctioned by the sacrament, ends with death: “until death do us part.” Yet the bond of their spiritual friendship endures forever! This insight can only be a source of a joyful encouragement to all those couples we serve in our many ministries. Something that they always hoped for, to love each other forever, is possible when their already deep love for their “dear half” (Letter DLVIII) is further deepened by the grace of spiritual friendship. And what is true for married couples is also true for all those who are similarly graced with the blessing of spiritual friends. All such friendships come from God, lead to God, make life more joyful and pleasant, and last forever.

And what about the “single spirit” and “one heart” promised to those who are blessed with spiritual friends? It is nothing other than the union, the community of heart and life, that is so desired by the human family and which has proven so elusive when sought by other means. We try everything to achieve peace in the world, in society, in the family and within the human heart. Why not try spiritual friendship? And why not begin within the Christian community whose members already share a common faith in Jesus and a shared goal, life with God? There are, I suspect, ecumenical implications in the practice of spiritual friendship. It transcends ecclesial borders, dogmatic differences and various liturgical and sacramental expressions to touch human hearts, transform daily life, and bind together those who share it into a union of peace and joy.

Francis confronts the objection in much of classical spirituality to the formation of “special or particular friendships,” especially among religious. Such friendships, selective by nature, are often inimical to the unity, shared vision and common purpose of religious life. Francis readily agrees that in a well-ordered monastery “particular association” are not only unnecessary but potentially harmful. But in the Introduction he is writing principally to the laity whose lives are lived out in an environment that is frequently indifferent, even at times hostile, to those who wish to pursue the devout life. Indeed, often even members of one’s family are opposed to such a pursuit. For these people, it is not only helpful to form spiritual friendships, it is even *necessary* for them “to unite together in holy, sacred friendship.”<sup>2</sup>

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[2] On the necessity of spiritual friendship in the thought of Francis de Sales, see the doctoral dissertation of Terence A. McGoldrick, *The Sweet and Gentle Struggle: Francis de Sales on the Necessity of Spiritual Friendship* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1996).

Why does he insist on the necessity of spiritual friendships for the laity who want to pursue the devout life? Because they do not have the spiritual benefits of a “well-ordered monastery” with its daily life of prayer, Mass and the practice of relational virtues. Such an environment provides its members with a relatively level road on which to make steady progress in holiness. For the laity, however, the road they must travel is frequently “rugged and slippery.” They must, therefore, grab “hold onto one another in order to walk more safely.’ For them to realize their “desire to embrace true virtue, it is necessary to unite together in holy, sacred friendship...so as to encourage, assist and lead one another to perform good deeds.”

What Francis had in mind in writing of a “well-ordered monastery” certainly applied to the experience of the reformed monastic life of his time. It also applied to the life of active, apostolic religious well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, following the Second Vatican Council, many of the familiar spiritual and communal supports found in religious life up to that time began to disappear. Over time, this has left many active religious on that same “slippery and rugged road” that the laity must travel. In short, what is said in the Introduction regarding the necessity of spiritual friendships for the laity can be equally said of many active religious today. Finally, on the selective nature of spiritual friendship, potentially so inimical to the unity of “a well-ordered monastery,” Francis has this to say: “...Perfection consists not in having no friendships, but in having only those which are good, holy, and sacred.” We are all familiar with the saying, “While you cannot choose your family, you can choose your friends.” Francis advises us to make wise and holy choices in selecting those friends. For on that choice, much depends.

Those who are familiar with the teaching method of Francis de Sales know that he often follows an exposition of a spiritual topic with advice, based on long pastoral experience, of the dangers or pit falls to be avoided. He follows that practice here. In Chapters 20-22, he points out several ways to test whether a friendship is truly a spiritual one or not. If the “friend’s” language is like Heracleian honey, that is, if it is too sweet, it is likely a false or evil friendship. Spiritual friends speak to one another only in “plain, sincere language and praise nothing but virtue and God’s grace....Holy friendship has eyes that are clear and modest, caresses that are pure and sincere, sighs meant solely for heaven, familiarities that are wholly spiritual, complaints only that God is not loved-all infallible marks of purity.” The point Francis wants to make is clear: when the object of one’s love becomes, in language or gesture, the friend rather than God or the practice of virtue, an alarm bell ought to sound. Francis also advises spiritual friends to be careful that they imitate only what is good and virtuous in one another. He writes amusingly that each of us “has enough bad inclinations of our own without burdening ourselves with those of our friends as well!”

With his teaching and, especially, his life experiences, Francis de Sales has left us a valuable legacy on the important place of spiritual friendship in Christian life. As we Oblates begin to engage more closely with members of the laity, inviting them into ever-deeper association with the Congregation in identity and mission, that legacy will serve us well. Indeed, it will ensure that our warm and cordial relationships with others, which come from God, will also lead to God. And along the way, its practice will make life’s journey more pleasant, the practice of charity more robust, and the daily accomplishment of the divine will more assured. For all these

reasons, it will be a lasting blessing to the Church, to the world and, especially, to the friends themselves!

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