



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Christian Humanism

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In the past year or so I have twice had the opportunity to speak about Christian Humanism and the Salesian understanding of the relationship between God, creation and the human family. In this letter, I would like to share with you some of my thoughts on this important theme in Salesian spirituality.

In the expression, “Christian Humanism,” humanism refers to the Renaissance celebration of human achievement in literature, the arts and sciences. In the sciences above all, it also came to refer to the distinction between faith and reason and to the assessment of them as parallel, separate and, for some, even incompatible approaches to reality. Such a separation threatens the intimate relationship, in Judeo-Christian thought, between Creator and creation and, thus, the unbreakable bond between the truths of one’s faith and human behavior and achievement.

While also celebrating human accomplishments of all kinds, “Christian” humanism roots them in the most fundamental truth about the human family: that we are created to God’s image and are therefore intimately related to Him as our origin and our destiny. Taking its lead from the Book of Genesis, Christian humanism begins with the affirmation of the individual person who, as created to God’s image and likeness, is imbued with the deepest dignity and is, therefore, to be treated with unfeigned respect, unfailing gentleness and a deeply abiding reverence. Further, because the human family has been joined irrevocably to God through the Incarnation and Redemption of Christ it enjoys a new divine depth. This means that we never have to jettison our humanity in our quest for holiness. In this tradition the saint is the fully actualized human person.

Thus, Christian humanism asserts that because of grace, we are not only God’s friends but also his partners in fostering the creative spirit throughout human history. In that light, every human

accomplishment, however small is, at the same time, a celebration of our relationship with God and, in a very real way, a furtherance of the divine plan and will for the human family and for all of creation.

Believer & Thinker

Francis de Sales urged his contemporaries to “Be what you are and be that well!” (Letter to Madame Brûlart, 10 June 1605, *OEA*, 13, pp. 53-54). Since Christians are both believers and thinkers, they are to look for the deeper Truth in all things. The Christian assertion that God is Creator, for example, permits us to affirm that the truths of faith are always, fundamentally, one with the truths of the various sciences. Originating from the one Source, they tend towards a common Goal. While this may not always be immediately obvious, we remain convinced of its truth and we permit that truth to guide our pursuit of knowledge and to suggest how that knowledge is to be placed at the service of creation. Many humanists in the school of classical Renaissance are convinced that they must either commit to faith, with its corresponding demands on behavior and practice, or to the unfettered pursuit of scientific truth wherever it leads them. The Christian humanist, on the other hand, is committed to living the truth of both and to demonstrating, in thought as well as in life, their fundamental inner-connectedness. Learning strengthens one’s faith and faith guides one’s pursuit of knowledge, while both are placed at the service of others and of creation itself.

The worldview of the Christian humanist is a seamless garment. Faith joins hand in hand with reason, theory gives shape and direction to practice, belief rolls up its sleeves to work for the betterment of the world. As both critical thinkers and staunch believers, Christian humanists place their God-given gifts at the service of others and foster the creative advance in all the sciences and arts according to the divine plan. They are responsible citizens who actively engage in their local, national and international communities. As fully integrated human beings who treasure the divine image in themselves and in every other person, they work tirelessly to enhance and to defend that image in all. They do this by reaching out to all peoples in justice and peace, but especially to those who find themselves on the margins of society and without advocacy.

Christ & Humanism

By definition, Christian humanism is deeply related to the person and mission of Jesus. In the view of de Sales, Jesus is “God’s kiss to creation,” its apex and perfection. As such, in the humanity of Jesus creation finds its most perfect response to its Creator, its most beautiful expression of prayer and praise, and its most complete union with God in will and life. For this reason, the manner in which Jesus lived out his brief life among us is the example and model for how we are to live our lives in loving relationship with both God and neighbor.

Jesus treasured his relationship with God. He deepened that relationship by spending whole nights in prayer before his father. And he went forth from that prayer – in response to God’s will for him – to serve God’s people in compassion and love. Thus, God’s Good News came to us in Jesus who fed the hungry, befriended and defended the outcast and marginalized, preached to the poor and died for the sinner. Though Lord, he came among us in the gentleness and humility of the Good Shepherd. He searched after the lost sheep and, having found it, caressed it tenderly, carried it on his shoulders with smiling joy, and returned it to the flock. According to the teaching of Jesus, each one of us is that lost sheep. We have all been searched for, found and carried lovingly by the Lord back to the saving community that is the Church. And that is exactly how we are to treat one another, no matter how far we have strayed, nor how often we have been lost.

Nor will Christian humanists neglect the example of the hidden years of the life of Jesus in Nazareth. For thirty years Jesus lived and worked within a loving family and among friends and neighbors. Those hidden years of simple family life teach us that a principal focus for our daily practice of virtue – especially of what St. Francis de Sales calls the “little virtues” such as charity, patience, gentleness, good balance, humility, tenderness and kindness – will always be those with whom we share life and with whom we work and play. We know that even though it never ends there, Christian charity must always begin at home!

In short, for the Christian humanist, the truths of faith and the practice of virtue and the moral precepts are never separable from daily life in this world, nor from our creative efforts to better creation, foster human achievement and love others in peace and justice. All aspects of our relatedness to God, creation and others form a seamless garment whose fabric is the love which Jesus modeled for us and which his Holy Spirit enables in us. That is why, according to the Salesian tradition, “in holy Church all is by love, in love, for love and of love” (*Treatise on the Love of God*, “Preface”).
