

'Be who you are and be that well:' What Salesian spirituality teaches college students

By Erin Maguire
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Test, presentation, hyperventilation, sweat, tears, exam, family, boyfriend, girlfriend, friends, short breath, quick temper, ugh ... stress much?

If any of those words resonate within your soul, raising hot little stabs of anger, please feel free to punch a pillow.

Now that you have settled down, let's take this moment to take a deep breath and talk about Salesian Spirituality.

All too often we (including me) get caught up with the 'joys' of college life, and forget what is really important in life: happiness through living simply in community. It's time get back to tackling one day at a time, and — in the words of St. Francis DeSales — "Be who you are and be that well."

Known as "the gentlemen saint" and the patron of journalists, DeSales spent his life 'living Jesus' in his writings and his everyday encounters with other people. He can best be described as a "Christian humanist." The DeSales University Web site says that means he was "a potent force for creating a spirituality that was admirably suited to people in every walk of life, especially the common person. He believed in accepting daily crosses as a sacrifice, living day-to-day the will of God."

DeSales was ordained in 1593 and was consecrated Bishop of Geneva in 1602, continuing his ministry to reform the clergy.

He believed "learning, for a priest, was 'the eighth sacrament' of the Church," according to literature published by the International Center for Salesian Studies (ICSS).

He wrote instructions for priests and preached sermons. Throughout his ministry, Francis advocated finishing work that has been started, and the power of prayer.

Without worrying about what you are supposed to do with this week — let alone, with your life — leading a life of Salesian spirituality also means

trusting in the will of God through prayer.

In the words of St. Jane de Chantal: "What is Your will for me, O God? I await Your plan. I want to live only for You and be guided by You always. Grant that Your holy will be done in me."

In addition to work and prayer, a third component of Salesian spirituality is living in communion with others, in order to seek the heart of Jesus.

In 1604, while DeSales was delivering a sermon on the importance of learning for priests, he met Jane de Chantal. The two began a life-long friendship that exemplifies the root of Salesian spirituality. At the time, de Chantal, a recent widow and the mother of four children, was living an unpleasant existence in the house of her father-in-law, managing the financial affairs of his estate.

Envisioning an order of sisters, de Chantal, with the help and support of DeSales, founded the Order of the Visitation in 1610. Throughout their years as friends, he continued to serve as her spiritual advisor.

The friendship that DeSales and de Chantal shared is frequently presented as an example for spiritual friendships today. For people of faith, it is important to have support.

In his "Introduction to the Devout Life" DeSales said: "For those who live in the midst of the world and who embrace true virtue, it is necessary to join with other like-minded persons by holy and sacred friendship; for, by this means [we] encourage, assist, and lead one another to goodness."

St. Francis DeSales lived the lifestyle he advocated, and had "more friendships than would seem humanly possible — he breathed friendship," according to an ICSS newsletter.

But his ministry was not about winning popularity; it was about winning hearts.

St. Francis said the word 'heart' "designates ... that [which] is most profound, most inalienable, most personal, most divine in us; it is that mysterious center where each encounters God, acquiesces to His appeals or refuses to do so."

The ICSS newsletter observes: "In Salesian tradition, union with God ... is a union of hearts — the most profound communion possible." In fact, DeSales believed human hearts "breathe in love (inspiration) and breathe it back again (aspiration)."

This quest for hearts is by no means coercive or authoritative. It does not involve imposing one's will on another person, but "persuasion, which aims to 'win hearts,' for as Francis says, 'to win a person's heart is to win the whole person.'" the ICSS says.

Salesian spirituality, most importantly, is a mission to unite people in the pursuit of final union with God. It focuses on personal discipline, prayer, and the completion of works started.

As St. Francis said: "Go courageously to do whatever you are called to do. If you have any fears, say to your soul: 'The Lord will provide for us.' "If your weakness troubles you, cast yourselves on God, and trust in Him. The Apostles were mostly unlearned fishermen, but God gave them learning enough for the work they had to do. Trust in Him, depend on His providence; fear nothing."

In living simple lives of prayer in community, St. Francis DeSales and St. Jane de Chantal expressed with their lives the essence of their spirituality. By looking at their friendship as a model, we can find reassurance in living simply and seeking union with God through the help and guidance of spiritual friends.

So the next time the words: "test," "presentation," "family," or "friend" stress you out, go to a friend and talk.

Study for the test, and then pray. If it is God's will, it will be done.

Erin Maguire was the 2003 recipient of The Catholic Standard & Times journalism scholarship. She is a sophomore at DeSales University in Center Valley, Pa.