



## LECTURES & PAPERS

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### *To Live & Learn ... It Helps to Hope!*

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#### PREFACE

The title of my lecture today, in celebration of the feast of St. Francis de Sales, is this: "To Live and Learn ... It Helps to Hope!" Granted it is not strikingly original; in fact, it is blatantly cliché. But fear not -- what I have to say to you will not be a mind-numbing presentation of psychobabble and sentimentality! Rather, my purpose is both to speak about and, with some luck, to inspire a sense of **hope**. I realize that this topic seems a bit abstract, maybe even surreal. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, it is a topic that has very real implications for all of us who are involved with the work of Catholic education in the Salesian tradition.

To make my point about hope, I will offer three little sub-plots. First, I would like to share with you an event of hope *in the life of St. Francis de Sales* which, in my opinion, is both the defining moment in his life and, as a result, the basis for his entire spiritual legacy. Second, I would like to transpose this 16<sup>th</sup> century event into the 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, as a possible context for understanding *our work as Catholic educators* in a post-modern world, a world where hope is sorely needed. Third, and perhaps most important for you at this point, I hope this talk *won't be too long!*

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## INTRODUCTION

One reason I would like to focus on a biographical event is that it seems quite appropriate, given the work you do here at Fr. Judge High School. The event I have in mind occurred during the saint's days as a student in France. Granted, his schooling took place in the magnificent city of Paris, not Mayfair, but still ...

Francis was sent off to school by his parents at the age of twelve, accompanied only by his cousins and their tutor. Traveling from the south of France, they encountered along the way the scars of many wars: the grand cities of Lyons, Bourges and Orleans, and the cathedrals in them, had suffered the desecration of invading armies. When they arrived in the environs of grand Paris, Francis took his place at the Jesuit school at Clermont, a bastion of papism at the time, where the medieval gargoyles on the facade of the buildings suggested an eerie, yet certain sense of refuge and security.

Though centuries apart and separated by an ocean, the scene of this young student is not all that different from life here today. The students who come before you each day have been sent here, away from their families for a time, but entrusted to you as their tutors; and it is you, perhaps more than any other adult in their lives, that they will long remember when looking back on their own histories. Along the way, they may not pass cathedrals destroyed by war, but they cannot help but see churches that we know are increasingly more empty. Yet to this place they come, maybe not in the numbers they once did, but nevertheless they come to this structure of stability in a changing, sometimes troubled, neighborhood. They come, it seems, for an education. But, I think they really come, and are sent, in search of **hope**.

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## THE CRISIS IN PARIS

In search of his own education, Francis de Sales was to spend several years in Paris. There he encountered first-hand the ways of the world. Life at the court of high society in Paris was everything you might well imagine! For the youth of that time, it presented a throng of new and sometimes wild experiences. There was no rap music per se, but followers of the courtly life were known to "sing the pleasures of drinking, hunting, and loving."<sup>(1)</sup> In this scene, remember, Francis is not yet a glorified saint; he is but a teenager, and by all accounts, quite a handsome one, who had his fair share of admiring young women.

In his classes, Francis undertook his studies in a Humanistic curriculum. His professors no longer limited themselves to teaching the abstract and calculated logic of medieval literature; instead, they read the more colorful and life-like teachings of the ancients. In this way, the young Francis was subjected to a host of classical writings, whose pagan influence exalted a life lived according to nature not grace, a life of worldly elegance and passionate action unencumbered by the challenges of religious asceticism. Surely, his mother did not bring him up to think or live this way!

Then, when he strolled over to the Sorbonne to take in a few lectures in Theology, he found yet another contrast. On the one hand, he sat through raging disputations on the theory of pre-destination in which, it seemed, God was free to decide who among us was to suffer the pangs of eternal damnation. On the other hand, Francis also heard the wise and learned lectures of Gilbert Genebrard, a famous theologian who spoke about the biblical Cantic of Canticles and their portrayal of God as joining with humanity in the historical unfolding of the eternal story of love. Now the poor lad was thoroughly confused!

This brings us to the key event. It took place, by common consensus, over a six-week period from December 1586 to January 1587, when Francis was only nineteen years old. It would be, for all intents and purposes, the lowest point in his life. For at this time, the young Francis was forced to acknowledge and confess the weakness of flesh that he so painfully felt. He knew all too well the temptations that life in Paris offered, even to the point of being tricked by his companions into visiting a house of ill repute. He knew all too well his own temperament, with its flashes of anger, as evidenced in more than one sword fight which he got into. He knew all too well that the pious exercises and scrupulous penances he practiced were of no real use, because the gnawing reality of his own human desires would not give way to his craving for holiness. And thus he fell into despair. In fact, he became convinced, in mind and heart and soul, that he, too, was among the number destined for hell. And this conviction became an obsession; fixated on the idea "of being for all eternity the enemy of God,"<sup>(2)</sup> he was unable to eat or to sleep with any regularity.

Then it happened. In desperate prayer one night, he prayed thus:

*Whatever may happen, O God, you who hold all things in your hand, whose ways are justice and truth, whatsoever you may have decreed concerning me in the eternal secret of your predestination and reprobation, you whose judgments are unfathomable, you who are ever Just Judge and Merciful Father, I will love you always, O Lord, at least in this life! At least in this life will I love you, if it is not given me to love you in eternity!*<sup>(3)</sup>

And when he finished praying, the crisis was over, the despair had passed, the obsession had subsided.

It is hard to judge what actually caused such a traumatic event in Francis' young life. It may have been physical fatigue, the energy of his many youthful endeavors finally wearing him out. It may have been intellectual consternation, the theological debates just not sitting well with him. It may have been a psychological complex, his naturally high anxiety yielding its destructive force on his delicate conscience. Whatever the cause, this crisis would prove to be a spiritual "conversion" for Francis -- as one of his biographers proclaims: "he overcame his 'saintly craving' for God by transcending it completely."<sup>(4)</sup> No longer would he seek holiness in the naivete of romantic fervor; instead, he realizes that whatever good he can muster, and whatever bad he might suffer, are far and away surpassed by the mercy of God.

As a result of this defining moment, Francis changes --both inwardly and outwardly. On the inside, he now knows sympathy and can "relate" to others who suffer in a similar way. On the outside, he takes up a life of service to others in response to the merciful example of the Son of

God, who came not to be served but to serve. But all of this, and the volumes of writing about the spiritual life that would follow in his later years, all of this is built on **hope**, on an experiential optimism that exalts the goodness of life, not as a result of human accomplishment, or even the worthiness of human nature, but as the very real effect of a true understanding of divine mercy.

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## HOPE & CATHOLIC EDUCATION TODAY

Hopefully, you are not already begging for mercy from this talk! Now it is time to bring the past into the present. What does **hope**, as exemplified by this event in the life of Francis de Sales, have to do with Catholic education today?

Our world, of course, is quite different from 16th century France. As many would label it, ours is a "postmodern" culture. Among its characteristic features are a fascination with entertainment, a claim to entitlement, and a tendency toward abandonment. Educators lament that students watch too much television, they try to buy happiness, and they dismiss truth as nothing more than personal opinion. Now, if that sounds cynical, well, it is! In fact, cynicism may well be the tell-tale feature of our postmodern world, where, according to the motto of the popular *X-Files*, we should "trust no one."

In such a context, the task of educating young people is daunting, to say the least. No longer can we merely pass along an intellectual heritage, ancient or medieval, pagan or religious -- that just will not work for today's Generation X. According to one teacher, these students

*have grown up in a world in which "truth" and "reality" are what Coke or Connie Chung or the American Medical Association might have invented through persuasion and technique. Reality is an image created on a video screen, or how you employ digital technology to alter that image into a completely new reality. Members of Generation X are cynical and sophisticated, and their reality is not objective, measurable, or fixed. In the postmodern world, reality and truth are a fiction.*<sup>(5)</sup>

This fiction puts our educational endeavor squarely into a state of crisis: for if reality is not real, and truth is not true, then what are we doing here? This current situation may be more institutional than personal, but it recalls the crisis suffered by the teenage saint in Paris. Like him we can easily despair, for if, despite our best efforts, salvation is beyond our reach, what are we to do?

The answer I would offer to you today is to bring **hope**. In fact, it has been suggested that this virtue of hope is a distinguishing characteristic of all Catholic education. According to one proponent,

*the challenge at a Catholic [school] is to bring learners in all their neediness a certain "comfort," to provide them an overall experience which may strengthen their confidence in life and encourage them to "be not afraid." This hope, however, is not so much a*

*"guarantee of safety," as it is "an invitation to risk." To live in hope is to see each day as an opportunity to transform one's self and the larger world.<sup>(6)</sup>*

But the only way this educational transformation will take place is if we first undergo our own "conversion." It may not be precipitated by a psychological crisis as extreme as that of Francis de Sales -- at least I pray it will not! Yet, if you are to bring this "comfort" to your students and "invite" them to stand strong in this postmodern world, then you, too, must come to grips with your own reason for being and for doing what you do.

Of course, you could do what you do another way. You could teach elsewhere, and probably be entitled to much more money for doing so. You could take the easy way out, demanding less from your students as a trade-off for keeping them entertained -- or at least quiet. You could abandon any goal of making a significant difference in your students' lives because of the many extracurricular difficulties they, and you, face each day.

But you do not -- and I pray you will not. And that is because of **hope**. Maybe it is a conscious decision on your part, or maybe not. But it should be. Maybe it is modeled for you by the Oblate presence here, or maybe not. But it must be. For all of us engaged in the work of educating the youth of our world, especially those of us vowed to a religious congregation whose purpose is to disseminate Salesian spirituality, for all of us hope has first to be lived before it can be taught. It is not, our day-to-day existence will have as little merit as that which propelled Francis de Sales to his own crisis.

And so our hope needs to be strong. And there is every reason to think that it is and can be. Not because of the successes you have had in your graduates. Not because of the victories you have achieved on the fields and in other competitions. Not because of the accomplishments you have made in bringing peace and justice to the neighborhoods. It is because of God that our hope is powerful and strong -- the same God who answered the prayer of young Francis de Sales long ago, the same God about whom you teach in your classrooms today -- this same God offers to each of you the gift of mercy.

My hope is that you understand this gift, better yet, that you experience it. And when you do, I ask you to share it with your students. Teach them, yet again, that Direction of Intention which is the very expression of our hope:

*My God, I give you this day. I offer you, now, all of the good that I shall do and I promise to accept, for love of you, all of the difficulty that I shall meet. Help me to conduct myself during this day in a manner pleasing to you.*

If they, and you, make the Direction of Intention each class, each day -- that is at least 5000 times over the course of their education at Fr. Judge -- then they will learn and live, then hope will convert their world, and ours.

And now your hope can become certainty. This talk is finally over!

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## NOTES

1. Cited in E.J. Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, the Thinker, His Influence*, 2 vols. (translated by Rory O'Sullivan) (Bangalore, India: SFS Publications, 1986), I:56.
  2. Cited in Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales*, I:68.
  3. Cited in Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales*, I:71.
  4. Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales*, I:71.
  5. Peter Sacks, *Generation X Goes to College* (Open Court, 1996), p. 124. Cf. Thomas F. Dailey, "Can 'Generation X' Learn at a Catholic College? The Role of Catholic Higher Education in Postmodern America," *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 20/2 (Spring 1997): 18-22.
  6. R.J. Connelly, "Hope and the Catholic University," *Horizons: the Journal of the College Theology Society* 24/1 (Spring 1997): 96.
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