

"Faith & Values"
Feature Essay



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Saints show us how we can profit from our faults

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CENTER VALLEY – The end of January draws near, and after just one month it’s likely those New Year’s resolutions have already fallen by the wayside. Futility frustrates our never-ending quest to become better people, and the saints among us seem few and far between.

That perception, however, perpetuates a false impression. Saints are not folks with fewer faults than the rest of us. What makes them saintly is their renewable resolve. Some – like FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) – can teach us how we, too, can profit from our faults.

Patron of our university, Francis is honored also as one of only thirty-three “doctors” in the Catholic Church, because his timeless teaching aids others in their pursuit of perfection. As we ponder again the perplexities of striving without usually succeeding, his advice merits consideration.



DeSales proposes a three-step process, which begins with the recognition of the uphill struggle we face in life. In truth, “we must never be astonished at finding ourselves imperfect ... because there is no cure for it!” Human finitude limits the personal resolve even of saints, as he writes to Saint Jane de Chantal: “I don’t know how I am made. I feel miserable, but I don’t trouble myself about it; and sometimes I am even happy in thinking that I am a really good object for the mercy of God.”

In that turn of thought we find a key to success. Admitting our inability to keep our resolutions is good; despairing about this is not. No one likes failure, but our typical responses to it – either giving up or trying harder – do not change the fact that earthly perfection eludes us. This is why de Sales repeatedly counsels calmness amid the calamities of life. “When we discover that the

lute is out of tune, it isn't necessary to break its strings and throw it out! What we have to do is to lend an attentive ear to discover which is the discordant string, and then tighten or loosen it as required." When we show "more compassion for (our heart) than passion against it," the potential for change "will sink far deeper and penetrate more effectively than fretful, angry, stormy repentance."

Step two is to shift the balance of power, by focusing not on our own ineptitude but on the eternal power of God. After all, no matter the prevalence of our misdeeds, nothing that we do or fail to do changes who God is. "The foundation of (our) trust," writes de Sales, "should be in him not in us. All the more so because we change, and he never does; he always remains good and merciful, whether we are weak and imperfect or whether we are strong and perfect." Entrusting ourselves to this divine power gives us the best chance to advance along the path to perfection; as one of his spiritual daughters, Mary de Sales Chappuis, would say centuries later, "Each time we offer him a fault to be forgiven, we offer him the title of Savior."

Having handed our efforts over to this saving God, all that remains, as the final step, is to begin again ... and again and again! Renewing our resolutions is not a sign of desperation but of persistence. Starting over despite never seeming to arrive at our goal comes not from being thickheaded but from being faithful and hopeful.

This is our lot in life. Still the saintly doctor encourages us: "Rest is reserved for heaven ... (while) on earth we should always fight as though we are between fear and hope. But we must do so, knowing that hope will always be the stronger, bearing in mind the power of the One who comes to our aid."
