St. Francis DeSales and the Myth of "Survivor"

Some of the best minds of the 20th and 21st centuries have considered the notion of *myth* in terms of its meaning and its impact on the way human beings negotiate the world. Most of these thinkers used the term *myth* differently from the way it is commonly understood. Sometimes when people hear the word *myth* they understand it to mean an ancient fable or story. Others hear the word myth and understand it to mean something that is superstitious or inconsequential. Others commonly understand the word myth to mean something that is false or even a lie. None of these meanings is what we have in mind this evening.

**RUDOLPH BULTMANN** (1884-1976) was a Scripture scholar who looked at the Bible in terms of its mythical qualities – that is, the ability of the Scriptures to shape the way we look at the world. He saw that the Scriptures were a product of a people who saw themselves as the People of God; in turn, the Scriptures shaped the people of Israel helping them to understand who they were and their place in the world. The New Testament Scriptures did the same thing for the early Christian Church, and the Bible continues to do that for upwards of 2 billion people in the world today. Even when Bultmann wanted to “demythologize” the Scriptures, his intent was to make sure that the Scriptures still speak to people the message they were intended to communicate.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL** (1904-1987), a 20th century philosopher, dedicated much of his career to studying the role of myth in various world cultures. In His book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he discovered that each culture has its myths which shape the people of that culture and give them the identity. Some cultural myths portray the world as a hostile place, dangerous and foreboding, a constant threat to the people of that community; in such cultures, people can react to the world
with caution or fear, choosing to create a small circle of safety within their community. Other cultural myths give the opposite portrait of the world, as a place of purity and beauty that calls humanity to live in harmony with nature as part of the “Circle of life” (to quote the Lion King). Still other cultural myths see the world as neither good nor bad, but simply a place to be conquered, used like a tool, and even exploited. Each of these cultural myths goes a long way in explaining how people will live their lives, how they will engage the world around them, and even what types of policies they will set.

Our own culture in the United States has been shaped by its own myths. From our founding days until now, men and women have identified various ways of viewing themselves in the land in which we find ourselves. Some people have seen us as living in the "New World" or for others it is a New Jerusalem, or even a New Garden of Eden. We who live here have, over the past few centuries, viewed ourselves as pilgrims, conquerors, explorers, exiles, refugees, and adventurers, to name just a few. We have viewed those who live here with us as everything from natives, to savages, to aristocracy, to invaders, to the haves and the have-nots. Occasionally, we have even managed to recognize that we are brothers and sisters!

Movies, books, music, and sports have given us all sorts of cultural myths that help us to identify ourselves as Americans, as Christians, and as members of a myriad of communities. Movie westerns give us an image of cowboys and Indians that bears very little similarity to the reality of their lives. Norman Rockwell painted illustrations depicting American life in its ideal and actually shaped the way people saw themselves. Many of our parents or grandparents grew up with the myth of the "self made man" who could be anything he (or she) wanted to be as long as he worked at it and "stuck to his guns." Many of us are familiar with the myth of the superhero of comic books and movies who, while appearing to be an ordinary citizen, actually has in another life great powers to affect great change in society.

Over the last half of the 20th century and continuing today, a powerful myth in our society, in my view, is the myth of the "survivor." Survivor is a term that we see and hear in our society all of the time. Many people identify themselves as survivors. Sometimes the context of their survival is in the face of great evil, like the survivors of the Holocaust and survivors of childhood abuse. Sometimes, people can identify themselves as survivors of a natural disaster, like hurricane Katrina.
Other times we identify ourselves as survivor in a comparatively trivial context. For instance, have you seen the bumper sticker that says "I Survived Catholic school"? Meryl Streep has had a long and successful acting career and has been termed a "Hollywood survivor." She is given the title survivor because, as a woman, she has been able to continue to find acting roles in her more mature years. I suppose she is a survivor, but she has hardly had a tough life!

One of the few songs that was popular when I was in high school that is still played at high school dances today is Gloria Gaynor's "I Will survive." And one of the few songs that has been released over the past few years that actually made it to my radio station is Destiny Child's "Survivor." Notice how many stories we've seen on A&E – "Biography", "True Hollywood Stories", "Headliners and Legends" – all of which follow the survivor myth. The person highlighted almost invariably overcomes great odds to achieve fame or success, then a tragedy (or human weakness framed as tragedy) grabs hold of them and they fall from grace. Then, when they have reached rock bottom, they continue to live and struggle to put their lives back together in some fashion. Usually at the end of the story, they are portrayed as people who have seen life’s ups and downs, the highs and lows, and continue to struggle on: they are survivors. I don't even have to talk about the TV show Survivor, do I? But when we stop to think about it, isn't it amazing how pervasive the myth of survivor is in our culture?

But I'm not sure that the myth of survivor would have resonated very well with St. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622). While surviving is certainly a good thing, especially considering the alternative, I think that St. Francis might have wanted more for us and for our culture. I think he would have asked us if it is enough to say that we are a survivor. After all, as another bumper sticker says about life, "In the end, there are no survivors!" If, in our past days or months or years, we have survived, St. Francis would want us today and tomorrow to not only survive but to live fully the life that God wants for us.

Now, I don't mean in any way to take away from the courage of those in our society who truly are survivors. There are probably even some among us tonight who have endured great hardship and suffering in their lives; and they deserve all the credit in the world for not allowing themselves to be crushed by life. And while our hats are off to them in respect and admiration, I would still hope that they would see as a possibility for themselves a life that goes
beyond surviving and is marked by real happiness, satisfaction, love and genuine peace. In a word, I would hope that they would be able to say that they have not simply lived but lived fully.

In his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, St. Francis encouraged us to consider why we are placed on this earth and then to live our lives according to that purpose. We are here in order that God may exercise his goodness in us. God has given us intelligence so that we may know him, memory so that we may be mindful of him, a free will so that we might love him and one another, imagination so that we might picture ourselves with him, eyes to see his wonderful work in creation, a tongue to praise him, and wonderful personal gifts that we might place in his service.

When we live our lives according to the vision of St. Francis DeSales, we recognize that, even in the midst of great trial and hardship, we are loved by God. Loving God in return can be our first step out of selfishness and our first step toward real happiness. When our love of God impels us to choose good in response to evil, peace in response to hatred, justice in response to greed, and charity in response to injury, we are on the road to holiness. St. Francis's vision of holiness is not the one of a mystic levitating in a chapel, is it? His vision of holiness is remembering the love of God in all the little choices we make each day.

Notice the difference here: surviving is a choice to live, but St. Francis is helping us to choose how we are to live. It is in these choices that the happiness of a full life can be found.

St. Francis makes no bones about it: living a full life means letting go of the sins that hold us back in our relationship to God, even our favorite sins! While it is certainly true that bad things happen to good people and that many innocent people suffer needlessly in this world, it is also true that a great deal of human misery is a result of our own sinful choices. While choosing good and avoiding evil will not create a utopia on this earth, seeking forgiveness for our sins, and with God's grace trying to avoid them in the future, certainly makes the world a better place and makes us happier people.

Sometimes I wonder how the survivors of real trials – those beyond their control – react when they hear someone who has merely survived his or her own self-indulgence identified as a survivor. So many of these celebrities we seeing on TV and on magazine covers who call themselves survivors have merely survived the consequences of their own selfish behavior.
When we live fully, we don’t give in to discouragement. Sometimes people who identify themselves as survivors give up on the world, other people and even themselves. They lose hope in ever really finding meaning in life. St Francis tells us to the contrary to have “patience with all things, but chiefly have patience with yourself. Do not lose courage in considering your own imperfections, but instantly set about remedying them -- every day begin the task anew.”

St. Francis DeSales recognizes that living fully is not something that we do alone. We have help and support from every direction. God gives us his grace with every breath we take. We are given a Church for community, guidance, and direction. Within that church the sacraments help us to meet the Lord in every dimension of our lives. As members of the human family, we belong to many communities, from small ones like our own families to larger ones like DeSales University. At their best, these communities provide us with love and support in living fully the life God wants for us. At their least, these communities provide us with unending opportunities for charity! In either case, no one is ever really meant to go it alone.

Jesus himself lived life in community. He lived eternally in communion in a Trinity of persons, and He lived on Earth in communion with us as one of us. Even today we can live in communion with Jesus through the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not merely spiritual “survival food,” but is really Jesus inviting us to share his life. It is wonderful that we have the opportunity to celebrate that gift tonight at the beginning of the Heritage Week.

In a pivotal moment of his Introduction to the Devout Life, St. Francis DeSales encourages the reader to make a decision to live the devout life - or as we have been saying to live a full life. Once we make the decision to live a devout or full life, all the other little choices we make become so much clearer. In every one of our lives we have the opportunity to make that same decision. Are we going to simply go through the motions in life or are we going to choose to live more fully?

At the end of the semester, I hope we are able to say that we have survived! But more than that, I hope we are able to say that we have lived, and lived fully. By living fully we realize that we are loved by God and placed here for a purpose. We have used the gifts that God has given us in his service and in the service of one another. We have followed our Lord where he has led us and have sought to share what we have found. In short, we have done what St. Francis asked us all to do, "Live, Jesus!"