“The Great Communicator”

We think of Francis de DeSales as a student, a diplomat, priest, provost, a missionary, a lawyer, a journalist, bishop, writer, reformer; a theologian—in fact, a Doctor of the Church and a Saint; and all of these are descriptive and useful in understanding his life and his influence on the life of the Church.

However, in my thinking about DeSales and our Salesian heritage in the light of the issues of the day and of today's scripture, the idea of DeSales as “communicator” intrigues me. We know that good communications is essential to success in every undertaking, from marriage to going to a Super Bowl; and all of the things that DeSales did required him to communicate effectively. Most importantly, he communicated the love of God. No matter which hat DeSales wore on any given day, his ability to communicate has always been regarded very highly. For example, some estimate that he may have written over 20,000 letters directing various individuals in the life of devotion. He wrote two bestsellers, one of which, his masterful Introduction to the Devout Life, is itself a compilation of letters on that very topic.

Well, our global community is a communicating community, which may be redundant since we presume communities are communities because their existence
hinges on sophisticated communication between members. However, it is unlikely that
DeSales would have envisioned the web world in which we live, a world of search
genes, HD, e-mail, camera phones, Real Time Transport Protocols, Synchronized
Multimedia Integration Language, HyperText Markup Language and cost-per-clickthrough. We are a culture in which communications and information systems
undergird entire social, economic and political networks. Our global market economy
and the security of nations depend on data transmission which is cogent, accurate and
timely.

One interesting niche in the information and communications sector is filled by
firms that offer technologies and services that improve communications for their clients.
These services specialize in making the transmission of information more effective. It’s
all about getting results. Google “communications firms” and you will pull up a
staggering 89,000,000 hits. Browsing through a few sites proved interesting.

I began by asked myself this question, “What do communications firms
communicate about communications to people wanting to communicate
communications?” One web site’s header reads, “Sell more products, programs,
services, ideas and positions to your most important audiences with VantagePoint
Communications!” A Toronto company promises, “Our services promote image
continuity and enhancement—the essential elements of a strong market presence.
Whether you want to increase sales, generate greater revenue, improve customer
relations, or strengthen your company’s profile, we can meet your bottom line needs.”
A competitor promises, “Global leadership in high-stakes communications.” And it’s
not all about making money, as one firm targeting not-for-profit corporations proves, when assuring potential clients that, “At Burness Communications, we see public relations as a tool for social change. We seek to empower people with information that can be used to improve the human condition.” So there seems to be something for everyone. Even DeSales University, the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales and many other orders, parishes and dioceses use such companies to manage information better and to promote the Catholic enterprise.

In light of even this cursory analysis, DeSales’ 20,000 letters and two bestsellers seem, perhaps, unimpressive. Yet, 386 years after his death he continues to communicate a message that still bears value in the economy of God’s redemptive love for the human person. It is certainly about the bottom line!

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus communicates this redemptive love by proclaiming the Kingdom of God, to men and women in need—people “dwelling in a land overshadowed by death.” Many of the characteristics of this kingdom will be explained to the people who gather around Jesus next Sunday to hear him say, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

In proclaiming the advent of this kingdom, he also communicates that God’s love calls us to both repentance and vocation. He is busy communicating God’s redemptive love in a way that is fresh and innovative and compelling. When offered this new information about how God is at work in the world, men and women can do nothing less than leave their nets and follow him. This is truly “high-stakes” communication.
DeSales was a communicator of this compelling love. This was not because he was seeking to “promote image continuity and enhancement” of God’s message, or even “to empower people with information that can be used to improve the human condition.” He communicated God’s redemptive love because, very simply, he was in love with God. Francis writes in his Treatise on the Love of God, “The favoring wind of His most holy inspirations… comes into our hearts with gentle force; it seizes them and moves them; it lifts up our thoughts and thrusts our affections into the air of God’s love.”

These poetic words are written by a man in love. People in love do not exchange data; they live in each others’ hearts. It is because of this love of God that Francis spent his life in its entire spectrum of roles communicating the love of God as incarnate and thus touchable, Jesus Christ, so effectively. Today’s technology can transmit more information more effectively than ever in history, but the communication of God’s redemptive love requires that we dwell in his heart and He in ours.

We too, by virtue of our baptism are called to communicate this redemptive and incarnate love. As DeSales commented, “To love our neighbor in charity is to love God in man.” We are, with DeSales and all the saints, communicators. We will be good at it if we share the same optimism about the human person, the same awareness of their needfulness and the same confidence in God who has come into the world to touch them. Our most important technologies are neither virtual nor digital; rather they are found in the scriptures, the bread, the wine and the communion fellowship that constitute God’s self-communication in this present moment.