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"Called to Love: The Challenge of Salesian Humanism"  

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Contemporary western culture is unique in many ways. One of its most distinguishing characteristics is the way in which it carelessly abuses words. In a culture where individuals are fed more facts than food, words and their meanings are constantly manipulated, abused, and taken for granted.

One of the best examples of such modern verbal degeneration is the present-day usage of the word "love." Particularly in English-speaking countries, people refer equivocally to many types of "love;" one may confess "love" for the shirt a person wears as much as for the person wearing it, or the God who made that person. The multiplicity of meanings and equivocal usage of "love" has brought much confusion to those who seek to understand its true nature and embody it in their decisions.

For example, many today see human love only in terms of its maternal, nurturing, affirming qualities. They often understand human love solely on the basis of its often concurrent good feelings or sensations, and sometimes announce love's onset or end as the good feelings it engenders wax or wane. This view bespeaks a limited understanding, however; love has another, more decisive, dimension. St. Francis de Sales saw true Love as being more than the emotions which can accompany it. He described true love in terms of a decision born of God's grace which requires tremendous personal strength and self-awareness.

St. Francis de Sales, and the school of spirituality he inspired, has much to say about the real meaning of love. His ideas constitute genuine opposition to many of the modern world's definitions of love. Rather than seeing "love" in terms of a capricious action exterior to the human person, he sees it as constituting the fulfillment of human freedom. Rather than limiting it to its nurturing qualities, he claims love also represents for man a challenge to be met with heroism, dedication, and courage. The life of love he outlines cannot be easily dismissed, and it carries with it many implications for the way one views life, human relationships, and the human experience itself. In addition, it presents the content of a genuine Christian humanism.

Willing to Love: The Place of the Heart

St. Francis de Sales views love as intimately connected with the human will; indeed he understands the will as that which both decides to love and apprehends the beloved. For de Sales, the will is understood as the human appetite for the Good by which man desires and moves toward what he perceives as valuable.(1) In this way, the will is the place of human decision and personal actualization towards transcendental value. Thus, he understands it as primary to all other human spiritual powers.(2)

The human will rules over all other human faculties, ordering them towards the true good as a father does his children.(3) It makes demands and imposes its authority upon the other spiritual powers to ensure that the human subject arrives at the Good which is his natural end.(4) In this way, de Sales positions the will at the center and crux of human personhood, as the means by which the person determines himself.

And yet, without the love of God, the will is forever consigned to earthly frustration. Without the love of God -- left wandering in this world of finite values -- it remains unfulfilled in its quest for complete actualization. While man rationally directs his will along the way of temporal goods, it is only by loving God that his will can ever reach its terminal end and achieve its authentic actualization:

The will governs all other faculties of the human soul, but is itself governed by its own love, and this causes it to be the same in character as that love. Now among all types of love, love of God wields the scepter. So inseparably united to it and so proper to its nature is the right of command that if it does not act as master it perishes and ceases to exist.(5)
Thus, in the mind of de Sales, man is called to a radical and definitive love of God. He is called to consistently choose God as the source and perfection of eternal value, and to donate himself generously to God's will with devotion. In this way, he is able to find his true self, and work out his salvation by loving others.

In the thought of de Sales, love is the epitome of human existence, and the goal of all human decision. By loving God and serving others, man actualizes his will in its fullest capacity, and becomes more human, freer, and closer to God. Without a heart of love, man resembles the profane from which he was formed; with a heart of love, he resembles the Divine to Whom he is called. In the thought of de Sales, love, more than any other virtue, is the definitive context of human existence and the Christian life.

Deciding to Love: The Challenge of Charity

In understanding the Christian life in terms of a journey in love, de Sales outlines several identifying characteristics of true love. According to de Sales, true love of God (and its consequent love of neighbor) is a gift from God, participated in only by the consent of the human will. In this way, human love is seen as a response to the initiative of God. It is precisely by this understanding of love as a human response, that love can be seen as something more than a frivolous escapade and assume its authentic form in the context of challenge and decision.

St. Francis makes this point very clear by identifying true love as the "movement, outpouring, and progress of the heart towards the good," rather than mere complacence, or pleasure, resulting from the good. To be sure, de Sales sees complacence as maintaining an essential role in the act of love. He views the pleasure of love not only as that which marks love's beginnings and consummation, but as that which also motivates it along the way. However, love differs from complacence in that love is the movement and action which is inspired by, but remains separate from, the feeling of complacence. As he writes:

> just as the day's true heart extends from the end of dawn up to sunset, so the true essence of love consists in the movement and effusion of the heart immediately following complacence and ending in union complacence is the first stirring or the first emotion a good causes in the will. This emotion is followed by the movement and effusion by which the will advances toward and attains the beloved object. This is true and perfect love.

While it is God who makes the first overture of love to man, it lies within man's power to accept that love or to refuse it. In as much a man accepts that love of God, his heart is enamored, his behaviors acquiesce to the Divine Will, and his soul seeks after unity with God. In as much as man rejects God's overtures of love by sin, his heart is hardened, his behaviors turn rebellious, and he remains bereft of supernatural life. Thus, de Sales posits man's participation in love as a function of his will. While it is for God to desire the salvation of all, it is for man to decide the actualization of that salvation.

It is in this way that de Sales successfully balances love's two dialectic elements of pleasure and perseverance. On the one hand, de Sales recognizes the role of complacence and attraction in inspiring and aiding man in love's journey. Without it, he argues, human love stumbles quickly into failure. On the other hand, he recognizes that love is more than complacence or good feeling; he recognizes that true love is a decision that requires dedication, perseverance, and courage. By describing love as the movement of the will towards the good, de Sales places it in the realm of human action. Thus, in so much as complacence is passive, love is active; in as much as feeling causes man to pause and behold, love causes man to decide and to move. And, being such, love requires more than acceptance; it requires an effort born of courage.

For St. Francis, then, charity is not something that overwhelms man and leaves him so awestruck as to whisk him immediately into the arms of the Beloved; rather, it is a human cooperation with a Divine invitation, by which man determines to move toward the good. By freely accepting this invitation, he begins a journey which requires constant vigilance, effort, and dedication. While love is best approached with child-like simplicity, it is best accomplished with mature discipline.

Daring to Love: A Change in View

But how does one assimilate this vision of love into his life? What import do the sixteenth-century writings of a dead French clergyman have for the sophisticated twentieth century? How can the thought of de Sales impact the modern world?

The Salesian understanding of love is magnificent precisely in that it preserves an authentic and true Christian humanism. By outlining the lofty goal of perfect charity as the epitome of human decision, de Sales calls man to a height beyond his natural state. Unwilling to allow man to remain content in the world of snubbed potential and half truths, de Sales seeks to bring out the best in the human soul. It belongs to animals to remain forever in the natural state; it belongs to men to rise up from their sin and assume their rightful inheritance as sons of God.

St. Francis de Sales proposes love as the means to this supernatural destiny. Through a decision to love, inspired by God's grace, man reaches beyond himself. By his dedication in love, and nourished by God's goodness, he clasps the hand of the Father. In his perseverance in love, and comforted by God's mercy, he is lifted up to his full stature. Love develops and promotes what is truly human. It is not content to allow man to remain fallen -- it bears him aloft into the very bosom of God.

http://www4.desales.edu/SCFC/Studies/1essay1997.htm
Thus, the thought of St. Francis de Sales preserves a humanism that is as old as man himself. By professing human love to be a willful act of co-operation with Divine love, de Sales challenges the contemporary world which sees love as nothing more than sensual indulgence. By teaching that perfect love describes the fulfillment of the human vocation, de Sales calls out to a contemporary world which seems intent on love's trivialization. By placing love within the power of the human will as ordered by reason, de Sales decries the contemporary world which tends to see love as an escapade in instinct.

De Sales' vision of love represents a call to the most noble parts of the human soul. By being authentically human, it transcends all temporal limitations, and impacts on men of every time. His call to love represents the heart of Christian humanism and the effective hope for the modern world. Even though its earthly application may require effort and perseverance, its heavenly consummation will prove beatific.

NOTES

2. St. Francis de Sales, Treatise, 56.
3. St. Francis de Sales, Treatise, 55.
4. St. Francis de Sales, Treatise, 58-60.
5. St. Francis de Sales, Treatise, 65.
7. St. Francis de Sales, Treatise, 214.
10. St. Francis de Sales, Treatise, 69.
11. St. Francis de Sales, Treatise, 68.
12. St. Francis de Sales, Treatise, 67-68.
15 St. Francis de Sales, Treatise, 208.

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