"It is not the multiplicity of things we do that we acquire perfection, but by the perfection and purity of intention with which we do them."

- St. Francis de Sales

"No matter where we are, Philothea, we must aspire to a perfect life," St. Francis de Sales writes in his Introduction to the Devout Life (13). Indeed, Francis de Sales' bold challenge to the human person is a strong affirmation that perfection is possible. His affirmation also speaks to a longing which has existed within the human person since the beginning of time. We yearn, within the depths of our souls, to know and to live the perfect life. Francis de Sales knew, however, that the ultimate meaning of perfection is union with God and that original sin, having broken this union and having caused the human person's imperfection, renders the path to perfection as challenging, difficult, sometimes seemingly impossible. Nevertheless, Francis de Sales' immensely rich understanding teaches us that the human person, regardless of time, place, or station in life, is obligated to aspire to perfection, or union with God, and that unless our path to perfection is God-centered, all of our longings will remain insatiable.

It is not difficult to see how a discussion of perfection, and the human person's longing for it, relates to our contemporary situation. In the world today, we are confronted with overwhelming technological developments, for example, which seemingly hold the key to human perfection. Last year, we came to know Dolly, the first animal to be cloned. With astounding rapidity, several scientists have made the possibility of human cloning closer to reality. Even more recently, scientists have discovered a possible link to human immortality-telomerase, an enzyme which, if mimicked, could greatly delay or even put an end to the natural aging process. At the core of all of these developments is the human person's longing for perfection. Developments such as these, however, reveal that in our imperfect world, it is frequently easy to misinterpret the meaning of perfection. We often aspire to achieve seemingly extraordinary human accomplishments, understanding too late that they are ultimately self-interested and hence self-destructive. It is often easy or comfortable to forget that creation is a gift, given to us by a loving Creator in order that we might unite ourselves with Him, instead using it in ways alien to its natural purpose. In the midst of our deepest longings, we threaten ourselves by that which fosters unanswered questions, confusion, and alienation rather than wholeness and fulfillment.

The thought of our Patron, St. Francis de Sales, speaks to our contemporary situation. His message is simple, yet profound, serving as our guide to true perfection in this increasingly complex world.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales reminds us that while the human person is imperfect, he is fundamentally good because he was made in the image of his good Creator. He writes:

"Consider that God has not placed you in the world because he has need of you, but solely to manifest His goodness. He has given you intelligence so that you might know Him, a memory so that you might remember Him, a will to love Him, an imagination to remind you of his benefits, eyes to admire the marvels of creation, a tongue to praise Him. He has made you in his image. (29)"
Thus, God created the human person in order that he may be fully united with Him and that he might fully know His goodness, through both his body and soul. God calls man to His love and asks man to direct his life towards Him. Francis de Sales knew that man's active conversion to this God-centered life is the true path to perfection.

The natural question which arises from this affirmation concerns how man, in his worldly existence, can direct himself toward God. When Francis de Sales emphatically proclaims "Live, Jesus!," he reminds us that God loves us so profoundly that He gave Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, our model of true perfection. Francis de Sales understood that man, in his worldly life, finds God through faithful and active imitation of Jesus Christ. For Francis de Sales, however, it was not enough to proclaim that we must aspire to union with God through Jesus Christ. Perhaps his greatest wisdom stems from his sharing with us those practical tools, or virtues, by which we emulated Jesus. Thus, the thought of Francis de Sales serves as a spiritual compass in our path to perfection. "Charity alone," he writes, "places us in perfection" (158). Francis de Sales reminds us of the magnitude of God's love: enfleshed in the person of Jesus Christ, God suffered and died on the cross in order that we may find new life in union with Him. His dying for us was the ultimate act of love, an act of complete self-giving. Thus, the clearest way by which we emulate Christ is in our self-giving, or service, to one another. Francis de Sales teaches us that to be God-centered means to be others-centered. His message is thus a reiteration of Jesus' own powerful teaching that the Kingdom of God is available to us only if we wash each other's feet.

Knowing the challenge of charity, Francis de Sales expounded on those virtues which help us to love beyond the self. Obedience, he teaches us, keeps us steadfast and strengthens our resolve to live a life of service to one another. Through humility, we come to know our littleness, and in this recognition, we affirm the majesty of God and the goodness of our fellow men. Through poverty in spirit, we recognize that the only true riches are that of God's love. Francis de Sales reminds us that all of these virtues comprise our spiritual cross, the way by which we come to know Christ and His love for us. But while he urges us to esteem these virtues in our hearts, Francis de Sales implores us to practice them faithfully and constantly. Finally, Francis de Sales reminds us that even the "little things" we do, if done with God in mind, are extraordinary in His eyes. Thus, Francis de Sales speaks, "It is not the multiplicity of things we do that we acquire perfection, but by the perfection and purity of intention with which we do them." Little things, if done in service to God, are real, whereas extraordinary things, done without God in our hearts, are illusory.

Thus, as we face the complexities of our modern world, we must keep the rich thought of St. Francis de Sales constantly in our minds and our hearts. His understanding reminds us of the true meaning of perfection and is a timeless guide for us as we continue on our path.

Click here to go back to the "Salesian Spirit" Essay Contest list!