In conjunction with the annual World Communications Day, the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University sponsors a writing contest for members of the campus community. World Communications Day is celebrated in most countries on the Sunday before Pentecost. The announcement of the theme is usually made on September 29, the Feast of the Archangels Michael, Raphael and Gabriel, who have been designated patrons of those who work in radio. The Holy Father’s message for World Communications Day is traditionally published on January 24, in conjunction with the Memorial of ST. FRANCIS DE SALES, patron of writers.

Theme for World Communications Day 2009


“best of the rest” 2009

Francis & Jane: Correspondence Founded on Spirituality

by MARGARET WAKELEE
Science, technology, progress. It has been the catchphrase that has fueled man’s pursuit of knowledge and the content of his work with an increasing urgency since the Enlightenment. The progress of technology is keenly felt in today’s world, especially in the realm of communication. The invention of new gadgets that allow for more portable and instantaneous communication has drastically altered the mode, quality, and nature of friendship. Although the technology itself cannot be considered either good or bad, those making use of it are still required, by the moral principles which serve as a light for faith in today’s culture, to use it for the good. Maintaining healthy and fruitful friendships across great distances is nothing new. Today’s man would do well to look at the example set by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal for guidance. Salesian spirituality is becoming ever more relevant as man’s world grows busier and silence seems to be even scarcer.

In his Message for the 43rd World Day of Communications, Pope Benedict XVI identifies the current generation as one with a particular gift for learning new technologies with ease and applying them to their daily lives without much effort. He writes:

Young people, in particular, have grasped the enormous capacity of the new media to foster connectedness, communication and understanding with existing friends, of meeting new friends, of forming communities and networks, of seeking information and news, and of sharing their ideas and opinions (1).

Adapting friendship to a digital age seems to be just another phase in the evolutionary process. Physical distance seems not to be much of an obstacle. The postal system is
significantly quicker. It can even be bypassed for the sake of electronic mail, instant messages or text messages. Exorbitant rates for phone calls no longer exist. Fees have been reduced and calls are no longer bound to a home or public phone. The mobile phone allows for man to be always reachable. Internet calls are free, not only nationwide but worldwide as well. While it is now easier to maintain contact, it does not come without its potential problems.

Benedict also offers some notes of caution so that the quality of friendship is not sacrificed for the sake of convenience. The quality of content exchanged must be such that it affirms the dignity of the person. The phenomenon of disinhibition, especially in reference to sexual deviance and hate propaganda, is to be avoided at all costs. He writes:

If the new technologies are to serve the good of individuals and of society, all users will avoid the sharing of words and images that are degrading of human beings, that promote hatred and intolerance, that debase the goodness and intimacy of human sexuality or that exploit the weak and vulnerable (2).

His concern, however, is not just for the friendships that will be generated as a result of this new technology but for the relationships that exist prior to and outside the realm of the digital world. He writes that “it would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop on-line friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbors and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of work, education and recreation” (3). There is no substitute for the intimate connection that comes as a result of physical presence in juxtaposition with intellectual, emotional and spiritual realities. Communication occurs not only through mere words typed in a message or
spoken over a phone or a webcam; communication is at its best when there is a unity between body and soul.

This is the nature of friendship. It is both a material and spiritual reality because it is between those who possess both a body and a soul. It is “one of the noblest achievements of human culture” and for this reason “we should be careful, therefore, never to trivialize the concept or the experience of friendship” (2-3). Communion is what all men are called to. It is the fulfillment of man’s telos. All his activity should be centered on this and should be moving toward this. It is in this way that man will make strides to bring about the Kingdom of God in the present. Love must permeate through this communion, so that love should be the guiding principle in all that man does in pursuit of this union. Benedict writes that when man feels

drawn towards other people, when [he] want to know more about them and make [himself] known to them, [he] is responding to God’s call – a call that is imprinted in [his] nature as beings created in the image and likeness of God, the God of communication and communion (2).

It is this idea of communion and communication which is at the heart of Christianity. It tells man the truth about himself and the truth about God. This sharing of oneself is what is most natural for man. The great 20th century Christian theologian C.S. Lewis describes friendship as a love, filia, as the ancients did, in his book on the Four Loves. He argues that friendship is “the instrument by which God reveals to each the beauties of all the others” (89). This is the true heart of friendship and must always be kept in mind so that friendship, in its purest form, is not belittled or taken for granted.
In the Introduction to *Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, Wendy M. Wright and Joseph F. Power, OSFS identify six key themes of Salesian spirituality. In particular the themes of Christian humanism, the contextual and relational aspects of the Salesian spirit, the centrality of human freedom, and living Jesus through a love of complacence and a love of benevolence are key to fostering a culture of respect, dialogue and friendship. Christian humanism, in a Salesian context, affirms the “innate dignity of the person” (34). Man is to be treated as a being with an inner worth that has been bestowed upon him as a child of God. Man was created to be in communion with God and with his fellow men (46). In this sense, human freedom is essential to Salesian spirituality. Man must have freedom in order to bestow love, as a gift of self and a gift for others (49-50). Without this freedom, friendship is not possible. Communion is not possible. Living as Jesus did is not possible without an outward sign of love that is the fruit of an inner love. In order for this to flow out of man, it must first exist within him. Further, to “live Jesus” is to make his presence known to as many as those who have hearts – in essence, every man (54-56). This is the universality of the call and mission of the Christian. The first place that this should be realized is in man’s closest and dearest friendships, and it should permeate throughout all of his friendships and encounters with his fellow men regardless of the technologies that are used.

St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal maintained a lengthy correspondence of spiritual direction and friendship. The manner in which they wrote to one another is a great example to those who wish to communicate with loved ones across great distances with the current technology. While Francis and Jane had to resort to what
today is often referred to as “snail mail”, the model that they lived is still applicable to
the new, faster technologies with which today’s man is blessed. Francis often spoke of
an “interior bond” he shared with Jane, which grew and became more pronounced
when they were apart (123). It is important to acknowledge the intimate nature of
sharing one’s soul directly with another’s soul without the barriers that physicality
imposes. However, this bond must be understood as “that of charity and true Christian
friendship” (127). The reason that the bond that existed between them was so profound
was because they each saw themselves as a servant of love to the other. They were also
acutely aware of the communion that existed between them, nurtured by the sacrament
of the Eucharist. By partaking of the body and blood of Christ, they were so united to
Jesus and to one another sacramentally (129). It is also important to note that Francis and
Jane always anticipated and delighted in the prospect of visiting each other in person.
Nothing replaces the intimate communication which takes place in the physical and
spiritual presence of a friend. Francis even deemed some topics too delicate to discuss
through pen and paper. He writes: “I don’t want to answer you now about your desires
to leave your homeland and to enter a novitiate of women who aspire to become
religious. All, this, my dear daughter, is too important to discuss on paper. There will
be plenty of time to do so later” (146). There is also the sense that Francis and Jane,
while a good portion of their “getting to know” each other occurred at a great distance,
they still considered the friendship they had to be centered on the fact that they had
once met and formed a relationship based on that prior to their correspondence.
Further, in the letters Francis wrote Jane, it is often that he offers spiritual advice to her.
In particular, he affirms the centrality of human freedom, or as he says, the “holy liberty of spirit” (125) and the love with which man is to “touch the hearts of others as do the angels, delicately and without coercion” (136).

Both the privilege of this new technology and the grace bestowed upon man in Christianity obliges man with a responsibility. In his *Message* Benedict charges the digital generation with a mission:

The proclamation of Christ in the world of new technologies requires a profound knowledge of this world if the technologies are to serve our mission adequately. It falls, in particular, to young people, who have an almost spontaneous affinity for the new means of communication, to take on the responsibility for the evangelization of this “digital continent” (3).

Benedict clearly identifies this responsibility with the Christian’s mission to make Christ’s Gospel known to those who do not know him. The responsibility and mission of the believer is not any different “in person” than it is “online.” Man’s final end is not any different now that he can communicate “digitally.” It is still his perfection to be united with God in the divine exchange of love. It is part of the Christian man’s obligation to foster an environment conducive to growing in communion with his fellowmen and God.

While the mode of fostering a culture of respect, dialogue and friendship has been widened by the new technologies, the nature of friendship, the nature of Christianity and the way in which man is to conduct himself in relationship to others and to God has remained the same. If the ultimate goal of the Christian is seen as being brought into communion with men and God, then the new technology should be seen as another means by which this can be brought about. It has the strength of bringing
people from great distances, physical, cultural and economic, into communication with one another. Benedict concludes that “human hearts are yearning for a world where love endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built, where freedom finds meaning in truth, and where identity is found in respectful communion” (3). The example set by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal serves to demonstrate how Salesian spirituality is a lived faith for a culture not necessarily wholly Christian. Today’s man, not only today’s Christian, must use the new technology that has been developed with great care so as to affirm the dignity and goodness of each person and to draw oneself into communion with them so that a culture of respect, dialogue and friendship is truly possible.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Works Cited


