In an earlier article, I focused attention on a small work that St. Francis de Sales composed for the Sisters of the Visitation toward the end of his life, “The Spiritual Directory for daily actions,” or simply, the Spiritual Directory. Francis composed this Spiritual Directory to help the Visitandines maintain a sense of God’s presence throughout the day, and to infuse even the most ordinary actions with a spirit of prayer and communion with God. I pointed out how this small work represents a distillation into a brief and compact form the fruits of Francis’ many years of experience and wisdom in living the Christian life and in guiding and directing others in that same endeavor….It provides a privileged access to the style and method of this great spiritual master.

The very first article in this Spiritual Directory, on the Direction of Intention or Right Intending of Deeds, describes the attitude and approach that we should bring toward every one of our actions. As the text itself of that first article states:

[Those] who wish to thrive and advance in the way of the Lord should, at the beginning of their actions, both exterior and interior, ask for his grace and offer to his divine goodness all the good that they will do. In this way they will be prepared to bear with peace and serenity all the pain and suffering they will encounter as coming from the fatherly hand of our good God and Savior. His most holy intention is to have them merit by such means in order to reward them afterwards out of the abundance of his love.

One can see immediately how this Direction of Intention can help us:

… to infuse a spirit of prayer and commitment to Gospel values into the “busy-ness” of daily life filled with the distractions that so easily fragment our attention and obscure our sense of direction and purpose.

I also noted that Francis was a man of his day. He was certainly not a “liberation theologian” in the modern sense of the term, nor did he raise questions about the social order of his day:

The overriding emphasis in Francis’ writings seems to be on personal conversion or change. There appears to be very little which might address the larger questions of social justice and the challenge to the followers of Jesus today to work for the structural changes essential to bring about a genuine transformation of society.

Thus, I proposed widening the scope of the Direction of Intention. It must include not only our personal transformation and advancement in the ways of God. Each of our actions has some effect, for good or ill, on other people, the physical world, and the wider web of institutions and arrangements in which we have a role as members of the human community and as inhabitants of the physical universe.

Thus the “right intending” of each action must also take into account this external dimension. “Bringing God into the picture” is not enough if we limit it simply to foster an awareness of God’s presence in our “inner space.” We should examine each action’s “rightness” and potential for advancing “Christ’s blessed hold upon the universe” in the wider external world as well.

What factors might help us in determining the “rightness” of each action and the potential of that action for advancing “Christ’s blessed hold upon the universe”? I would suggest that attention to the eschatological dimension of the Direction of Intention would prove most helpful in answering this question.

A New Understanding of Eschatology

Traditional language about the eschatology derives from the scriptures and centers around “the four last things”: death, judgment, heaven, and hell.\(^7\) Biblical writers found it difficult to talk in concrete terms about these future realities because they lie beyond our ordinary experience. Thus, these writers made use of colorful and allusive imagery to provoke our imagination and give us small glimpses into the meaning of terms such as “heaven” or “the Kingdom of God.”

Past discussions about eschatology have tended to emphasize the differences between “the present” and “the future,” between “this world” and “the next,” between life here on earth and “heaven.” Such language seems to imply a radical disjunction between our present life and the future “Kingdom of God,” as if everything here below would suddenly come to an end and only “heaven” would remain, “forever and ever.” Some of the apocalyptic language in the Bible can be and has been interpreted in this way: for example, in the Book of Revelation:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Rev 21:1-2)\(^8\)

A passage like this can too often be read as if the image of the future Kingdom, the heavenly Jerusalem, the new heaven and new earth, will replace the old, and that this new heaven and earth have nothing to do directly with the shape of the present social, political, and economic order. However, recent study of theology and of eschatology in particular have demonstrated that eschatology has as much, if not more, to do with the present than with the future.

Today theologians no longer talk of a radical disjunction between the present world and the future Kingdom of God, or “heaven.” One of the important contributions of modern liberation theology has been to demolish this “separatist mentality.” A separatist mentality refers to the “pie in the sky when you die” approach that understands “judgment” and “salvation” as exclusively or at least one-sidedly otherworldly realities. In contrast to this approach, liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutièrrez argue that this present world and its history and “the world to come” are part and parcel of one reality, and it is mistaken to try to separate them into

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\(^7\) This article focuses more on cosmic and collective eschatology (the destiny of the world and of human history) rather than on personal eschatology (our own individual destiny after death). For a popular discussion and summary on recent thinking about eschatology, both personal and collective, see Zachary Hayes, What Are They Saying About the End of the World? (New York: Paulist Press, 1983); idem, Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology (New Theology Series 8; Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989); Dermot A. Lane, “Eschatology,” pp. 329-342 in The New Dictionary of Theology (Joseph Komonchak, editor; Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1987).

\(^8\) Bible translations are based on the New Revised Standard Version.
two different spheres: “There are not ... two histories, one profane and one sacred, juxtaposed or interrelated, but a single human progress, irreversibly exalted by Christ, the Lord of history.”

Thus, Richard A. McCormick, S.J., explains how theologians today would express the relationship between the future Kingdom of God, or “heaven,” and our efforts to create a more just and peaceful world in the present moment:

[T]here is a radical continuity (even partial identification) between the eschatological promises and hope (the Kingdom) and human liberation from systemic oppression. This entails a profound readjustment of our assessment of political and economic activity. These can no longer be viewed simply as “worldly” or secular pursuits.

Thus, our deeds are not just means of gaining a reward “in heaven.” The Gospel calls us to work toward the creation of a new order, a more just and peaceful world right here and now. The various realizations of such a “new society” foreshadow and are intimately linked with God’s Kingdom that is to come.

**Eschatological Language and the Christian Imagination**

Recent advances in biblical studies have focused on the function of the eschatological language and imagery developed by the early Christians. Such language played an important role in shaping their imagination and in forming a Christian outlook or “worldview.” An eschatological imagination constituted “a defining factor in their re-formation in the Spirit, the key to their spiritual formation.”

The documents of the New Testament abound in eschatological language and imagery. References to “the last days,” “the end of ages,” the coming judgement, the parousia or Second Coming of Christ, echo again and again in the Gospels and Epistles.

We are accustomed to understanding this reference to “heaven,” “the last days” and the last judgement, in a linear time frame, as if the eschatological realities of our faith lie only at the end of, or beyond a one-directional timeline of history. But, as Stanley P. Saunders has recently pointed out

...God’s actions are not limited by our cultural constructions of time. For the New Testament writers, the qualities associated with “the last days” lie not only in the future but also in the past and especially in the present, wherever and whenever God pours out the Spirit and restores a broken creation.

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[12] Ibid.
In other words, if we are properly to understand references to “heaven,” “the last days,” and the Second Coming the way in which biblical writers intended them and used them, we should not necessarily be thinking about something that we will see and experience only after our death, or at the end of the world. Rather, for the early Christians, this eschatological language (“heaven and hell,” “the Kingdom of God,” “the Last Judgement”) played an important role in shaping their imaginations so that they could effectively deal with the challenges and needs of the hear and now.

In imagining the shape of the future “Kingdom of God,” they could bring that vision of a “new world” to bear upon the present, on their understanding of the contemporary situation. This helped them to discern the role that they, as Christians, were to play in the establishment of God’s Kingdom in this world:

In this…process of confronting the present with God’s final purpose for history there is the implicit recognition that the End of history bears a unique relationship to the whole of history. It is not just the last thing to happen, coming after the penultimate historical event. It is the point at which the truth of all history comes to light.

Thus, in this process of bringing that vision of God’s future Kingdom to bear upon the present, they were able to see every moment in life in relation to the coming of that Kingdom.

**The Kingdom of God and the “New Society”**

What exactly did the early Christian have in mind when they spoke about this “Kingdom of God”? What was in their imagination as they pictured for themselves that “new heaven and new earth,” the “new Jerusalem” mentioned in the Book of Revelation?

The term “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven” comes, of course, for the preaching of Jesus himself. Based on Jesus’ Sayings in the Gospels, the prominent Indian exegete, George Soares-Prabhu, S.J., has offered a description of what he calls “a new society” implicit in the dynamics of that Kingdom of God.

Like the Kingdom itself, this new society is never clearly defined in the sayings of Jesus. It remains a “vision,” shimmering in the distance, a summons rather than a plan, an inspiration more than a programme of action.

Despite the apparent vagueness of this “vision,” the sayings of Jesus reveal the shape of the new society more clearly in a number of places. Soares-Prabhu points first to the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5: 21-48):

[I]n their extreme radicalization of traditional ethics they [the antitheses] call for a radically new society in which violence is eradicated at its roots (vv.21-26), where women are no longer trates as sex object and discriminated against by men (vv.27-32), where simplicity of speech and the transparency of human relationships makes external guarantees unnecessary (vv. 33-37), where order is maintained not through fear of retaliation but through the concern of love (vv. 38-42), and where men and women accept each other, across all barriers of class, caste, race and culture, as the children of the one Father in heaven (vv. 43-48). 

Other sayings of Jesus spell out in more detail some of the values of such a “new society”:

[Jesus’] vigorous polemic against consumerism and money (Mk 10,23-27; Mt 6,24; Lk 12,13-21); his revolutionary interpretation of authority and service (Mk 9,33-35; 10:35-45); and his radical condemnation of titles of honor (Mt 23, 8-10) – these are all demands for a non-consumer, non-competitive, fully egalitarian society…which will be geared to the satisfaction of the fundamental needs of the many rather than to the artificially created demands of a few, in which domination will be replaced by service, and in which man will be more important than money.

This vision of a “new society” implicit in the preaching of Jesus about the Kingdom of God cannot be reduced to a blueprint for social structures. What we have rather are some key values that such a new society would include—freedom, fellowship, justice. Jesus’ vision “does not present us with a static pre-fabricated model to be imitated, but invites us to a continual refashioning of societal structures in an attempt to realize as completely as possible in our times the values of the kingdom.”

Jesus’ vision represents God’s will for our world, the goal toward which all of human history is moving. His vision of that coming, future Kingdom of God shaped the imagination and worldview of the early Christians and enabled them to deal with the problems and challenges that they faced.

**The Dominant Culture in New Testament Times**

We have seen how the New Testament’s vision of a “new society” represented the future, God’s future that informed the everyday lives and world-view of these early Christians. This vision shaped their imagination and enabled them to confront and resist the dominant culture of a Roman Empire that was bent on imposing its own view of reality on the minds and hearts of its subject peoples. The worldview promoted by Rome focused on worship of the emperor and the goddess “Roma.” Worshiping the emperor and the personified city of Rome symbolized

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[16] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., p. 31.
submission to the absolute power and authority of the state in all spheres of life: economic, political, social, and religious.\textsuperscript{19}

Christians resisted vigorously this dominant culture that was hostile to their understanding of the world. The book of Revelation gives a vivid description of this dark side of Roman rule, its exploitation and hunger for power. Revelation 18 and 19 describe the inevitable collapse of that empire under the weight of its greed and injustice; for example,

\begin{quote}
Fallen, fallen is Babylon [=Rome] the great!
It has become a dwelling place of demons, 
A haunt of every foul and hateful beast. 
For all the nations have drunk 
Of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, 
And the kings of the earth have 
Committed fornication with her, 
And the merchants of the earth 
Have grown rich from the power of her luxury (Rev 18:2-3).
\end{quote}

For Christian, absolute power and ultimate authority lay not with the Roman emperor, but with God. Thus, they developed their own imaginative rhetoric to describe a Christian construct of reality. They articulated an alternative ordering of the world, they world they way it can and should be ordered, the world as God meant it to be. This was their “the Kingdom of God.”

**The Dominant Culture Today**

The most pervasive culture that dominates large segments of our world today has its base and origins in the West, in Europe and North America. Viewed form the margins, through the eyes of the poor and oppressed especially in the developing world, this dominant culture promotes an ideology of the powerful that serves to maintain their power. Through its communication media—television, radio, films, advertising, the press, and so forth—this dominant culture constructs a world for us through its images and ideals, so that we respond to the world on its terms. This dominant culture’s ability to capture our imagination with its own vision of what constitutes human happiness and fulfillment exerts a powerful influence on the habits and lifestyles of growing numbers of people.

Few of us are able to escape the influence of this “culture of consumption.” The dark side of this “consumer culture” is its ability to marginalize and trivialize Gospel values and the spiritual. It holds captive our imagination with its own vision of reality. Like all worldviews or ideologies, it tends to absolutize itself as the one and only true way to understand and interpret the goal of human life and history. The Christian worldview provides a different way of perceiving the world. It moves us to resist and to challenge the effects of the dominant culture. Robert Bauckham comments, “[S]ince this different [Christian] way of perceiving the world is fundamentally open to transcendence it resists any absolutizing of power or structures within this

\textsuperscript{19} See, for example, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s description of the situation faced by the Christian community for whom the Book of Revelation was written in *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 192-198.
world. This is the most fundamental way in which the church is called always to be counter-cultural.”

Vincent J. Donovan gives us an example of the powerful hold that the so-called “consumer culture” of the West can exercise on the imagination. He describes a “game” that he often plays with American school children. “Americans so earnestly dream of being free,” he tells the students. “Here is a test to determine how free you really are.” He then asks them to name one appliance of American technology that they are now using, without which they could live in contentment:

Could you do without a refrigerator? They answered, “Of course not, food would go bad, and soft drinks don’t taste any good hot.”

Without a car in your family? “No, shopping centers are so far away.”


A telephone? The answer “No!” is deafening and unanimous.

Donovan Comments:

American children are not free. They are the targets of some of the most massive mind conditioning ever let loose on human beings, and their parents are willing accomplices in this process. As a result, we have produced a generation of young people almost immune to the gospel. How can the Sermon on the Mount or the teachings of Jesus about the dangers of riches and possessions ever reach children who are indoctrinated with the ideals of status and money and who have become fierce defenders of private property and converts to the belief that happiness is synonymous with a multitude of possessions?

Donovan comments highlight how the dominant culture, especially in the West, is capable of influencing our imagination and forming our worldview. That dominant culture’s vision of what constitutes human happiness and fulfillment too often excludes Gospel values and the spiritual. In this context, Christianity and a “Christian imagination” represents a counter-cultural move to shape an alternative worldview, on that opposes and resister the excesses of such a “culture of consumption.”

The struggle to reorder the imagination as a way of resisting the dominant culture’s idolizing of power and wealth parallels the experience of the early Christians and their confrontation with the dark side of Roman rule. The early Christians developed the eschatological language and imagery that we find in the New Testament as an effective means of creating a “counter culture.” This “counter culture” served to undermine the dominant culture of their day that “masqueraded

[22] Ibid., p. 132.
as common sense.” Their vision of the coming Kingdom of God shaped their worldview and determined their interaction with others, both Christian and non-Christian. As Saunders describes it.

The reordering of their imagination put Christians in tension with the culture in which they live. Reformation of imagination and practice necessarily takes place both within and against other human construction of reality. The eschatological dimensions of spiritual formation in the New Testament, in other words, provided Christians with the means to resist the particular worldviews and practices of cultures in which they lived.

This Christian worldview, this vision of what human life in this world can and should be like, reflected the early Christians’ study and meditation on the scriptures, both Old and New Testament, and their profound grasp of the life and teachings of Jesus. The image of the new society implicit in his preaching and conduct “shimmered in the distance” and inspired them to work toward its realization. Keeping a Christian vision of the goal of human history before the eyes of their imagination enabled them to orient each of their actions toward the fuller establishment of God’s Kingdom of justice, love and peace.

**Signs of the Kingdom Already Come**

The hope and trust in the inevitability of that “Kingdom of God” enabled the early Christians to respond to the manifestations of its presence that were already irrupting around them and in their everyday lives. St. Paul refers to these manifestation of God’s Kingdom as “the fruits of the Spirit”: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).

In our own day, the Indian theologian, Felix Wilfred, counsels us to pay close attention to “the new social movements at the grassroots.” These also represent, in their own way, manifestation of God’s Kingdom coming to be:

[The new social movements] seem to achieve world-wide what religions and traditional ethics have not succeeded in doing, namely, to bring together in effecting solidarity people across the borders of race, nation, culture, religion and so on. These could be movements for the liberation of women, protection of nature, defense of the dignity and rights of indigenous peoples, and marginal groups like dalits (so called “untouchables” of India)…The Struggles these movements are engaged in and “the art of resistance in everyday life” they practice move the world towards greater fellowship in justice and peace.

These “new social movements” at the grassroots represent indication of how God’s Spirit is active in our world today, even beyond the boundaries of traditional religions. As Wilfred comments,

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The new social movements seem to offer a lot of scope for the religions to give concrete expression to their universalistic trends and their commitment to the poor and the marginalized. [The movements] operate with an “ethics of refusal” to accommodate to the prevailing order of things. Further, these movements are rooted in context and at the same time also open up the shape of the world the poor and marginalized hope for.

These new social movements thus represent concrete ways of how the Kingdom of God is already coming to be.

The lives and witness of faithful followers of Jesus represent another way in which God’s Kingdom manifests itself in our midst today. The example of individuals like Mother Therese of Calcutta, Blessed Pope John XXIII, Dorothy Day, or even non-Christians like Mahatma Gandhi sheds light on the power and activity of God’s Spirit already building that Kingdom. Their actions and way of life proved concrete examples of the shape of that “new society” that is our goal.

And each day we can find simpler and more common clues to the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom, evidence of that “new society” implicit in the preaching of Jesus: the cry of a newborn infant just beginning its life; the joyous smile of a mother when she welcomes one of her children back home after a long absence; the kiss of a married couple as they start their new life journey together, filled with hope for what the future may bring; the success of a human rights group in freeing a political prisoner unjustly confined.

A Christian worldview sees these manifestations of the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom as signs of hope. They inspire and encourage us to do our part in building that “new society” that forms the preparation for God’s Kingdom that is to come. They constantly challenge us to examine our political, social, and economic commitments. They provide the “stuff” for the vision of the possibilities for human life and community that we need to keep before the eyes of our imagination as we move toward God’s future.

The Christian Vocation as a “Faithful Witness”

A temptation threatens all who work toward the establishment of God’s Kingdom of justice, live, and peace. This is the temptation to discouragement, and even despair. The task of building God’s Kingdom often seems to be an impossible one, hope of ever changing or elimination the structures that give birth to violence, injustice, selfishness, greed, and hunger for power and wealth appears useless, and even foolhardy.

But such surrender to hopelessness denies the most fundamental demand or our vocation as followers of Jesus, the vocation of “faithful witness” (see Rev 1:5). Jesus himself “failed” from a human standpoint. But this “failure” revealed the truth that, ultimately, the coming of the Kingdom is God’s work. It will come, but in God’s own time. Thus God raised Jesus from the dead, and vindicated Jesus’ “faithful witness,” the testimony of his life, example, and ultimately his death, his “faithful witness” to the truth of God’s power and love.

[26] Ibid., p. 41.
Thus, our struggle to bring to birth that “new society” implicit in the vision of Jesus may appear to have little success. But that does not mean that our efforts to live a life of faithful witness ourselves are useless:

The essential form of Christian witness, which cannot be replace by any other, is consistent loyalty to God’s kingdom. In this powerless witness, the power of truth to defeat lies comes into its own.  

And there are always those “signs of hope” described above that remind us of the in-breaking, already, of that Kingdom in our own day.

### Eschatology and the Direction of Intention

The article on the Direction of Intention includes an “eschatological dimension” as an important part of the dynamic of St. Francis de Sales’ approach to daily life. Before each action, interior or exterior, Francis first asks us to remind ourselves of God’s presence and to focus on the way in which our deeds are somehow advancing God’s Kingdom in this world.

Then, in the final sentence of the paragraph quoted above from the Spiritual Directory, an eschatological element appears. Francis lifts our eyes briefly toward the future, toward heaven. He tells us to picture God as a loving parent who does everything out of love for his children, including both the pleasant and unpleasant experiences. He tells us to imagine the joys of God’s Kingdom that will be ours after death: “His [God’s] most holy intention is to have them merit by such means in order to reward them afterwards (par apres) out of the abundance of his love.”

The *par apres* or “afterwards” obviously alludes to “heaven.” Francis is making use of the traditional language of his time. He himself most likely possessed a more nuanced view of the relationship between “this world” and “the next.” But for many, traditional eschatological terms such as “heaven, hell, Last Judgment,” and so forth imply a “separatist mentality,” that the Kingdom of God and its future realization lie beyond human time. It has nothing to do directly with the shape of the present social, political, and economic order.

But we have grown in our understanding of the proper role of such eschatological language in transforming the imagination of followers of Jesus. Today such an outdated eschatology with its “separatist mentality,” brings with it potential dangers. It is not enough simply to maintain a sense of God’s presence, with the hope of gaining a reward “in heaven” for our good actions. Such an attitude misunderstands the meaning of “heaven” both for the early Christians and for Francis himself. Such a “pie in the sky when you die” eschatology would allow us too easily to accommodate to the prevailing culture and thus to sacrifice the prophetic dimension of our vocation as followers of Jesus.

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Thus, I would propose interpreting the advice of St. Francis de Sales on the Direction of Intention with a new understanding of its “eschatological dimension.”30 No longer would the par après, the “afterwards,” represent a “heaven” that lies beyond death or at the end of time. In this new interpretation, the par après refers to the future, God’s future, that “new society” that Jesus challenges us to begin building in the here and now.

With this vision of such a new society before the eyes of our imagination, we can better discern and respond to the manifestations of the presence of God’s Kingdom already irrupting in today’s world and in our everyday lives. This vision of Jesus’ “new society” constantly disturbs and reorients our “common sense” view of the modern world and the events that are taking place on the stage of its history. This vision of Jesus’ “new society” keeps this world in perspective and leads us to engage critically its assumptions and practices as an essential part of our life as followers of Jesus.

Such a vision challenges each of us concerning our lifestyle, our political, social, and economic loyalties, and the kind of work in which we are involved. Do they allow us to accommodate too easily to the dominant culture with its false values and distorted priorities? Or do our life and each of our actions challenge the dominant culture and present clearly the alternative, the vision and values of Jesus’ “new society”?

Praying the Direction of Intention with this understanding of its eschatological dimension, we can better orient each of our actions toward the fuller establishment of God’s Kingdom of justice, love, and peace in everything that we do, in each and every moment of the day.

**Conclusion**

The little prayer, suggested and inspired by this article on the Direction of Intention, thus takes on a new and more encompassing meaning:

> My God, give me your grace. I offer you all the good that I shall do in this action and all the pain and suffering to be found in it. Stay close to me and help me to see how what I am doing can advance “Christ’s blessed hold upon the universe.” Amen.31

Not only does the “right intending” of our deeds keep God’s presence before our eyes. The “right intending” of our deeds can also guide our choice of actions and determine the direction of our endeavors. As we allow God’s future to illumine the present, we can see more clearly the best ways to advance “Christ’s blessed hold upon the universe.” With the vision of that new world, that more just and peaceful society in our mind’s eye, we do our part in laying the foundations for God’s kingdom that is to come.32

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[31] Ibid.
[32] My thanks to Rev. James F. Cryan, O.S.F.S., who read an earlier draft of this paper and gave many helpful comments.