Two Saints You Meet in Heaven: Paul & Francis de Sales

Parish Mission – Our Mother of Consolation – Philadelphia, PA

28 January 2009

A few years back, one of the more popular books being read was by Mitch Albom, who wrote about The Five People You Meet in Heaven. The plot involved a man who died and subsequently encountered five people who, unbeknownst to him, had influenced his life in significant ways. The narrative premise is that all our lives are connected to each other, directly or indirectly, and whether we realize it or not.

This evening I’d like to facilitate your encounter with two people with whom we are connected, and you don’t have to wait until you get to heaven to meet them. These are two prominent saints: St. Paul the Apostle (c. 8-64) and St. Francis de Sales, Bishop and Doctor of the Church (1567-1622). What I’d like to explore with you is how the former is connected to the latter, and how they have both influenced our faith in a singular way, whether we realize it or not.

Two Saints

At first glance, connecting these two saints may seem odd. When we think of St. Paul, we probably picture that irascible preacher, the one who openly admits to having persecuted the “way” of the early Christian sect. He who had authorized stoning for breach of the Judaic law was converted in a blinding flash and then turned his zeal toward establishing Christian communities throughout the Roman empire.

This contrasts, rather starkly, with our picture of St. Francis de Sales as the “gentleman saint,” the one who emphasized little virtues like humility and gentleness, the one who wrote so much about love and simplicity, the one who founded an order of religious women that catered to the weak and the infirm.

Unlikely as their connectedness may seem, the differences between them are really just matters of perception. In point of fact, these two saints share significant similarities, of which I’ll mention just five.

(1) Both St. Paul and St. Francis de Sales were trained as lawyers, and in their youth they benefitted from a top-notch higher education: Paul, “at the feet of Gamiliel,” the most famous of rabbis in Jerusalem; Francis in following the lectures of Genebrard in Paris and those of Pancirolo in Padua, two of the more widely-renowned teachers of theology and law, respectively.
After that, both St. Paul and St. Francis de Sales got knocked off their horses when God wanted to send them a convincing message! For Paul, it was the call to conversion; for Francis de Sales, it was the confirmation of his priestly vocation.

As a result, both St. Paul and St. Francis de Sales become missionary preachers, undertaking arduous travels to communicate the Good News to peoples of their respective times and places. Paul took to the cities of Asia Minor in and around the lands of present-day Turkey and Greece, while Francis sojourned throughout the Chablais region in what is now France and Switzerland. Their evangelical success was unparalleled, with Paul establishing the first full-fledged Christian churches, and Francis converting more than 20,000 wayward Calvinists back to the Catholic Church.

Perhaps because of that stressful work, but more likely due to something genetic, both St. Paul and St. Francis de Sales also became prematurely bald!

But the last similarity is most important for us. St. Paul and St. Francis de Sales are connected, and both are known to us today, because they were prolific, inspirational writers. The twelve biblical letters attributed to St. Paul the “Apostle” attest to the incipient organization of what we now know as Christianity, and his writings continue to be read in churches throughout the world. The twenty-seven volumes of letters, sermons, treatises, and other writings by St. Francis de Sales attest to a level of wisdom and skill in communication that have made him one of only thirty-three “doctors” of the Church; his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, whose 400th anniversary of publication is this year, still remains on the best-sellers list when it comes to religious reading.

Frankly, it would take us far too long to explore “St. Paul in the Writings of St. Francis de Sales,” despite that being the title that enticed you to come here this evening! I suppose that when we do meet them in heaven, we’ll have plenty of time to consider that topic more fully. It suffices to say that the connection between St. Paul and St. Francis de Sales was one of direct influence. The Bishop of Geneva expresses his esteem for the early Apostle when he states that St. Paul was “the most learned of men” (*Oeuvres* VII: 174-175), an “incomparable master and doctor of the nascent Church” (*Oeuvres* VII: 415), one who is “admirable in all that he says” (*Oeuvres* IX: 346-347) and who “has a marvelous grace in all that he writes” (*Oeuvres* X: 131).

For our mission this evening, I would like, instead, to focus on just one line from St. Paul’s writings, one quote of his that had a defining impact on the spirituality of St. Francis de Sales, one saying that, with the help of both saints, still speaks to us in today’s world. It comes from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians and is found at the very top of Francis de Sales’ “directory” on how to live a spiritual life. It’s a simple saying, yet one that packs a powerful punch. It will be our mantra this evening and could be the motto for our lives:

“The love of Christ impels us.”
St. Paul to the Corinthians

To appreciate fully this Pauline saying, it would help to know something of the audience to whom he wrote it. Corinth was the place of a Christian community established by St. Paul on the second of his three missionary voyages. Located on the southeastern coast of Greece, its two harbors made Corinth a crossing point for wayfarers on the seas and, thus, the city was economically strategic. Politically, it was a capital city where a Roman proconsul sat in governance. And culturally, the cosmopolitan mix of Romans, Orientals, and Jews made the place a vibrant urban center. In sum, Corinth was where Christianity intersected with the secular, indeed pagan, society!

In particular, two cultural factions there came into conflict with Paul’s work. On the one hand, a group of “libertines” championed the view that human freedom was such that no outside authority should be permitted to impose on their thoughts and actions. On the other hand, a group of “ecstatics” laid claim to a spiritual freedom from any order or structure that might oppose individual interest. These groups would challenge Paul’s role as an “ambassador” and impugn the motives for his ministry.

Let’s pause here for a moment to recall how “connected” our lives really are. Consider, if you will, what appears to be a “libertine” variation in modern life, evident in our recent presidential election, in which a majority of Catholics (54%) chose to vote in favor of an avowedly pro-choice candidate, despite the U.S. Bishops’ stated opposition to supporting candidates whose political activity contradicts moral principles. Or, consider the “ecstatic” emphasis in today’s world of higher education, about which David Brooks wrote in this week’s New York Times, where he contrasted the loss of institutional thinking to the predominance of individualism, “with its emphasis on personal inquiry, personal self-discovery, and personal happiness.” Then as now, it seems, the patterns of thought that Paul confronted are typical characteristics of any human culture. But let’s return to Corinth ...

In his letter, Paul addresses the Corinthian conflict in this way (2 Cor 5:11-12):

"... knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well-known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart."

Paul is here reminding the Corinthians – whom he will have visited at least three times and to whom he will actually write four letters (of which we only have two) – that he is no fly-by-night, itinerant preacher
who just happens upon them. Unlike the “ecstatic” orators whose puffy speeches are open to quite a bit of speculation, he is “known” to them, and not only in appearance or reputation; he is known to their “consciences,” to that place inside them where they can think critically and make sound judgments.

Having reminded them that they already know him and his work, Paul then re-states the guiding and enduring principal of his teaching (vv. 14-15):

... the love of Christ impels us, because we are convinced that one has died for all (and) therefore all have died. And he died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

For St. Paul, divine charity – the love that Christ has for us more so than our love for Him – is ultimately what lays claim to our lives, what presses us and obliges us and urges us onward. The term he uses here suggests not only something of value or importance, but the sense of having power and giving impetus. “The love of Christ” goes far beyond any ecstatic feeling or libertarian option; instead, it connotes a particular force, as that which executes a juridical decision: God has decided to love us, and that trumps everything.

And that decision is carried out in an historically definitive way – through Jesus’ death on the cross. Paul is “convinced” of this truth that we affirm by our profession of faith, namely, that the mystery of our salvation connects the eternity of love with the Savior’s death and resurrection. The very purpose of that Good Friday and Easter Sunday was “so that” we might have a new kind of life, a life that shares in this divine embrace of love.

Paul then explains the implications of this newfound Christian belief (vv. 16-17):

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

In other words, for St. Paul the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ has decisively begun a new order to the whole of our lives. No longer need we live by the limitations of a secular existence. Instead, by freely choosing to believe in Jesus Christ, we transfer the meaning of our lives from the dominion of this world to the dominion of God’s world.

This message of human freedom resulting from divine love is the central theme of the entire corpus of Paul’s writings. Thus he concludes his letter to the Corinthians by saying (v. 20):

So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; (and) we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.
In sum, Paul does what he does – in his preaching and his writing – because he has to, in virtue of his experience of the love of Jesus Christ, which he wants to share with the Corinthians and with us as the very basis of our Christian faith and as the foundation for our lives.

“The love of Christ impels us.”

---

St. Francis de Sales to Us

Among his many citations from Paul’s letters, St. Francis de Sales quotes this one line in fifteen different places! In fact, he dedicates an entire chapter in his *Treatise on the Love of God* to this very theme of the “ecstatic and superhuman life.” With his characteristic traits of taking a bit more latitude and showing much more literary flair, this Doctor of the Church exhorts us to a deeper understanding of St. Paul as he spells out for us the implications of this compelling love.

First, St. Francis de Sales affirms the significance of this saying (*Treatise* 7:8):

... in my judgment, St. Paul has made the strongest, most cogent, and most admirable argument ever advanced to bring all of us to ecstasy and rapture in life and operation. ... I beg of you, listen, consider, and weigh the power and efficacy of the burning, heavenly words of that Apostle who was completely ravished and transported with love for his Master. Speaking of himself, but the same thing must be affirmed of each of us, he says, “The charity of Christ presses us.”

Then he explicates the force of St. Paul’s image:

Yes, ... nothing urges on a man’s heart so much as love. If a man knows that he is loved by no matter whom, he is impelled to love in turn. If a commoner is loved by a great lord, he is much more impelled to return that love, and if by a great monarch, how much further is he impelled to do so! But now ... we know that Jesus Christ, true God, eternal and almighty, has loved us even so far as to will to suffer death for us, “even death on a cross”.....

Francis then goes on to elucidates how this crucified love impels us:

*(The Apostle) means that our Savior’s charity presses down upon us in an especial way when we judge, consider, weigh, meditate, and attend to this conclusion of faith. What is the resolution? ... If one, namely Jesus Christ, died for all ... it was endured for them and in consideration of them.*

Ever concerned with the practicality of our faith, Francis de Sales then spells out the implications of this saving death:
What follows from this? I think I hear that apostolic mouth crying like thunder into our hearts’ ears, “Christians, it follows that in dying for us Jesus Christ had desired us.” What has he desired for us except that we should be conformed to him, “in order that” says the apostle, “they who are alive may live no longer for themselves but for him who died for them and rose again.” As God is true ... how powerful a conclusion is this in matters of love! Jesus Christ died for us; by his death he has given us life. We live only because he died. He died for us, belonging to us, and in us. Therefore our life is no longer ours, but his who has purchased it for us by his death. Therefore, we must no longer live as belonging to ourselves but to him, not in ourselves but in him, and not for ourselves but for him. ...

Finally, St. Francis de Sales confirms the result of this teaching for the spiritual life:

*What further conclusion must we draw ... except (that) ... we should consecrate every moment of our life to the divine love of our Savior’s death ... all our works, all our actions, all our thoughts, and all our affections. ...*

*Thus, then, the holy ecstasy of true love is accomplished when we live no more according to human reason and inclinations but above them according to the inspirations and promptings of the divine Savior of our souls.*

Whew! Let’s take another brief pause, especially if all this talk of “ecstasy” has your head spinning! Let’s try to simplify. We all believe that Christ died for us. We all know, in theory at least, that we are called to love God with everything we’ve got. But, you may be asking, in the hectic world of the twenty-first century, what does this mean and how can it be done?

Here, St. Francis de Sales comes to our aid once again, by going that one step beyond St. Paul. In a sermon for Good Friday in 1614 (*Oeuvres* IX: 44), Francis tells us:

> ... (considering) the love that caused our Savior to die, nothing else remains except that we live out of love for him; not by any kind of love, but by a love similar to his (similar, not the same kind, for that is not possible), by a strong and courageous love which grows amid contradictions.

Now the saint is speaking on our level. None of us needs to show our love by being crucified ... thankfully! None of us can love that completely, even if we think we could; nor will any of us have that opportunity, even if we wish we could. That kind of love pertains to God alone, and we can only be its recipients.

Still, “**the love of Christ impels us**” to live by love in ways specific to our own situation, in and through the circumstances of our own lives. Being pressed by recognition of the enormity of God’s love for us, we are urged, again and again, to make the choice to live and to love according to our faith.
To this end, St. Francis de Sales reveals to us something of the passion of his own soul, and in doing so he offers the remedy for ours. In a meditation he prepared for the very first profession of vows of the Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary (Oeuvres XXV: 434), he speaks to them in a first-person prayer. It is a reflection we might make our own this evening. He says,

_O my Jesus, my Savior, you died for me in order to give me life; ah, therefore, my life is no longer mine, but yours. I should give it to you, and I do give it to you; and to give you more, I offer it and sacrifice it in the manner of living that is most agreeable to you, (that is) according to my condition and bearing. I wish, therefore, no longer to live for me, but for you, and for that reason I make this choice, to live more for you and less for me._

And there you have it ... the Salesian approach to a devout life, based on St. Paul’s saying that “the love of Christ impels us.” We live our love for God not in what is exceptional or heroic or miraculous; after all, there is only one cross exalted on Calvary and that has already saved the world! Instead, we find the crosses by which we “render our Lord love for love” (Oeuvres X: 364) right here and right now, in the everydayness of our lives: in the work we do, in the relationships we have, in the things that happen to us, in the frustrations we experience on a daily basis. That is where we live our lives, and that is where we are impelled to love the God who has given us everything.

In this Jubilee Year of St. Paul, and on the 400th anniversary of the publication of St. Francis de Sales’ _Introduction to the Devout Life_, I hope and pray that this little talk has enabled you to meet these two saints, even before you get to heaven, and to see that what they wrote long ago is still closely connected to how we live today. Of course, there is so much more that they have to say to each other and to us. For now, let us go forth in the peace and joy of knowing with them that

_“The love of Christ impels us.”_

---

REV. THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S., S.T.D.
Fr. Louis Brisson Chair in Salesian Spirituality
Director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture
DeSales University (Center Valley, PA)