Francis de Sales, the Provost

_De Sales basic approach to conversion is that, in the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, “only love is worthy of belief.”_

This evening during Heritage Week, we salute St. Francis de Sales as the Provost of the Cathedral Chapter of the diocese of Geneva. As Provost, he held the second most important position after the Bishop. He had responsibility for the Cathedral chapter made up of priests who were an advisory body to the bishop. He was also offered a position as a member of the Chambéry Senate where he could readily use his talents as a lawyer as well as his many other gifts. His best friend, the President of this senate, urged him to accept this position since his predecessor in the Provost’s office was also a member of the Chambéry Senate. But Francis turned it down despite the prestige and the perks it would bring him and his family because he saw that the job of senator was very demanding in terms of time and wanted to give himself over completely to his ecclesiastical calling.

We have to keep in mind that the Cathedral chapter was in exile, and its rightful place was the cathedral in the city of Geneva, which the Calvinists had taken over by force of arms around 50 years earlier. A number of the members of the cathedral chapter desired to recapture the city of Geneva, the see city, and dislodge the Calvinists by force.

However, the young Provost had another more Christian approach to conversion. In his first formal address to the cathedral chapter, he presented a very peaceful way of winning over Geneva and the Calvinists. He noted that their exile was “the more painful and shameful as our frequent sins prolong it.” While using a number of battle metaphors in his talk, Francis put forth his views on the conversion of the Calvinists in this way: “I propose neither steel or powder; nor will I levy an army of mercenaries with no faith or piety. . . . It is by charity that the walls of Geneva will be breached, by love the city will be invested, by love it will be won over.” (OEA, 7:107-108 as cited by Lajeunie, 150).
As his biographer Fr. Lajeunie observes: “Ideas cannot be killed by cannon fire; the only way to extinguish error is to enlighten; the real way to make the light attractive to man is to love man” (Lajeunie, I:150). This is precisely what St. Paul discovered on the road to Damascus; it was not so much the blinding light of Christ that won him over, that converted him to Jesus’ teachings but the great love that Jesus had for his followers and for all of mankind. When seeking to find out the source of the voice, Paul asks: “Who are you sir?” And the reply, “I am Jesus the Nazorean whom you are persecuting” must have touched Paul’s heart very deeply to know and to realize how much this Jesus of Nazareth loved his followers to identify himself with them, their persecution, in their sufferings. Paul understood at that critical and grace full moment that he could not separate Christ from the members of his body and the incomprehensible love that Jesus has for us, especially when we are under siege. He came to clearly understand that you cannot separate Jesus from the ones he loves. So it was not so much the blinding light of Christ that converted Paul but rather this unfathomable love of Jesus, which, after his conversion, he could not cease to live and to preach to all the nations.

Both Paul and Francis de Sales understood what was later articulated by Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the foremost theologians of the last century, viz., that only love is worthy of belief. This idea was clearly expressed by John Paul II: “Conversion to God always consists in discovering His mercy, that is, in discovering that love which is patient and kind as only the Creator and Father can be; the love to which the ‘God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ is faithful to the uttermost consequences in the history of His covenant with man; even to the cross and to the death and resurrection of the Son. Conversion to God is always the fruit of the ‘rediscovery of this Father, who is rich in mercy’” (Dives in misericordia, no. 13). In other words, John Paul II is saying that Jesus really loves us to death.

We have to know that we are loved before we believe, before we can become converted and continue to be converted, which is not a one and done process but must continue throughout our whole lives because of our sinful tendencies. Conversion and belief are not so much a matter of the mind as they are a matter of the heart. Francis de Sales clearly shows the connection between love and belief when he says: “Our confession of faith is not so much an act of the intellect and of faith as an act of the will and love of God” (Treatise on the Love of God, book 7, chapter 10; Ryan, II, p. 40).

We especially experience this love that Jesus has for us in celebrating the Holy Eucharist which makes present in our midst his self-giving, unconditional love. So we believe because we are beloved. This is the precise point that Paul learned on the road to Damascus and that Francis de Sales insisted on in his address to his cathedral chapter. It was his firm conviction that others will only be converted if they see Jesus’ love reflected in our lives, that is, when we truly “Live Jesus!” This is in fact the central message of the Good News which we are all called to preach, especially by the way we live.