“The Salesian Spirit” ESSAY CONTEST

Revived in 2006, with the 40th anniversary of DeSales University and in conjunction with World Communications Day, the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture sponsors an annual 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 2015

COMMUNICATING THE FAMILY:
a privileged place of encounter with the gift of love

“best of the rest” award 2015

Marriage and Calvary:
A Salesian Vision of Marriage in a Secular World

by
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In his message for the 49th World Communications Day, Pope Francis identifies the family as a “womb,” in which the human person first learns to receive and to give love. The family can be rightly called a school of communication, because it is foremost a school of love. It is a school which can only be built on the sturdiest of foundations, on living stones which are sealed to each other by the indissoluble bond of love in Christian marriage. Unfortunately, there are many in today’s secular world who mistakenly believe that this foundation can be discarded while preserving the edifice of the family. To do so, however, would contradict the nature of human love, in which Calvary, the “true school of love,” is accepted as a sacrificial and redemptive aspect of love’s bond.1

For St. Francis de Sales, marriage is understood not as a merely contractual relationship, but as a specific kind of friendship that is blessed and finds its origins in God. As articulated by Francis de Sales in the Introduction to the Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God, not all human relationships constitute friendship in its fullest and most proper sense. The true friendships of which Francis de Sales writes require three integral elements. The first is that both people in the relationship love one another. The second is that there is mutual knowledge of this love. The third is that there be “communication, intimacy, and familiarity with one another.”2 The meaning behind “love” and “communication” in this basic three-part outline of true friendship requires a fundamental understanding and preservation of the classical Salesian anthropology which underlies it.

Whereas “communication” in contemporary parlance takes on a wide variety of connotations, for Francis de Sales, communication was understood as flowing forth from the nature of man as a being made in the image and likeness of God. Communication takes its origin in the Trinity, where there is “an essential communication by which the Father, in producing the Son, communicates his entire, infinite, and indivisible unity to the Son.”3 As man is made in the image of God, all human communication, therefore, will be an “image” of the communication which occurs within the life of the Trinity. Communication, as it occurs in God, is above all an exchange of love. Therefore, human communication is found in the exchange of love. It is this commerce of love which constitutes the bond of human friendship.

The communication of love which occurs in human relationships is poured out from its source in the human heart, in which is most clearly realized the image and likeness of God.4 Whereas in contemporary parlance, the heart is an image often associated with cliché sentimentality, de Sales understood the heart as the core or center of the person, the unifying principle of the person’s intellect, will, passions and affections.5 More specifically, the heart refers to the whole person insofar as he is a being who can both receive and give love, with the heart understood as “the seat and source of love.”6

Francis de Sales’ multifaceted understanding of love is articulated at length in the Treatise. He begins by considering love as it is commonly experienced at the everyday level, namely as a “passion,” or response to some good which is perceived at the sensual level as ‘good for me.’ Above the passions Francis places the will, understood as the faculty of the person which, once something is apprehended intellectually as good ‘in itself,’ “bears us towards the good and makes us tend towards it.”7 For Francis de Sales, the will has a privileged position of governance in relation to the
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other “acts, movements, feelings, inclinations, habits, faculties and powers” of the person. Love is primarily understood in relation to the will. Love in its fullness, is not passive, but is rather an action of the will.” As all the other faculties of the person are taken up in this active movement, it is the person’s heart which is said to move, and it is this “movement, outpouring, and progress of the heart towards the good” which most properly constitutes love.

Francis de Sales’ understanding of love is foundational to his understanding of the bond of friendship as indissoluble. As an act of the will, love is not something which merely arises from emotional circumstance, but is a free response of the will, what Francis calls a love of dilection. Whereas emotional connectedness may break down and a person may Intellectually doubt the viability of the relationship, love abides as the existence of the relationship is continuously willed. Established on a firm human foundation, the indissolubility of friendship finds its ultimate grounding in God. Insofar as a person unites his heart to God, his heart participates in the eternal love of God, and is then able to gift this divine love to others. In an early letter to St. Jane de Chantal, de Sales declares that because of this, their friendship is “indissoluble.” Human friendship is not understood in separation from God, but rather finds its beginning and ultimate end in God.

By considering marriage as a particular form of friendship that is consecrated as a sacrament, Francis de Sales illustrates that the indissolubility of the marriage bond is not a merely juridical pronouncement of the Church, but arises from the very nature of love itself. The permanence of the marriage bond allows the marriage to continue to endure amidst the many trials that it will invariably face, and to take on a kenotic character. The marriage does not only consist in an erotic seeking and enjoyment of union with the other, but becomes ecstatic, as the self is poured into the other in love in an overflowing manner. As Benedict XVI explains in Deus Caritas Est, ecstasy does not mean “a moment of intoxication,” but rather an “ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving.”

This liberation is not so much a ‘freedom from’ suffering as much as a freedom to persevere in union with the beloved amidst trials. The ecstasy of any human love, particularly within marriage, will mirror the ecstasy of God’s love for man, in the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection. A parallel can perhaps be drawn between the ecstasy of married life and the ecstasy that Francis de Sales experienced in his spiritual friendship with Jane de Chantal, where, as Wendy Wright describes, “love took these two out of themselves. It created between them not simply a place where they felt ‘at home’ or affirmed in their perception of how things are and should be.” Similarly, marriage is not solely a place for mutual affirmation, but rather a place where the spouses are challenged by each other and by circumstance to become the person each is meant to be. The family is indeed holy ground, but as Greenfield cautions, holy ground can be dangerous ground, as each person’s presuppositions about their identity are potentially called into question, especially in times of conflict. This conflict, however, is not by necessity inherently destructive, but can rather be an opportunity of grace, to in which the person is renewed in the context of an ever-greater trust in God as the final guarantor of the relationship.
Insofar as it is a school of love, the family is especially a school of humility. For Francis de Sales, humility and love are inseparable. De Sales famously stated in his *Spiritual Conferences* that “charity is an ascending humility; humility is a descending charity.”\(^{18}\) He further explains in a sermon that while “humility would seem to remove us from God ... because it always makes us descend ... [but] in proportion as we abase ourselves, we render ourselves more capable of ascending to the top of this ladder where we shall meet the Eternal Father.”\(^{19}\) The parallel found between de Sales’ description of humility and charity and Benedict XVI’s description of *eros* and *agape* is striking. Benedict writes that “*eros* and *agape* – ascending and descending love – can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized.”\(^{20}\) In marriage, erotic love seeking passionate union with the other will be coupled with moments of great humility, which may require an apparent separation from the beloved in thought or emotion. This perceived separation, however, is not permanent, but it rather provides further impetus towards a strengthening of the union.

For Francis de Sales, the relationship between humility and erotic love in marriage is profoundly realized in the praxis of everyday married life. Francis gained a deep knowledge of the challenges of life in the married state through his spiritual direction of people in his diocese living ‘in the world,’ which led him to write in one letter that he saw the married state as “a perpetual exercise of mortification,” requiring “more virtue and constancy than any other.”\(^{21}\) This mortification, however, is not the endpoint. Rather, any situation involving suffering can be a “school of humility where we learn about our misery and weakness.”\(^{22}\) It is in the discovery of his own imperfection that the person learns to love himself as he is loved by God, thereby allowing him to love the other as she is.\(^{23}\) Especially when this humble love of other in the midst of everyday trials is lifted up to God in prayer, it becomes united to Christ’s redemptive passion, and the cruciform element present in marriage becomes evident. In order to be raised up, “a lover’s devotion [must take its place] at the foot of the cross.”\(^{24}\)

It is precisely this cruciform element which cannot be tolerated by a post-modern view of marriage. The various subtle manners in which marriage has been undermined in contemporary Western culture can be viewed as different ways of running from the shadow of the cross. The concept of marriage as a soluble contract between consenting individuals means that if real or perceived suffering is encountered in the marriage at a level beyond what is deemed acceptable, the relationship can be legitimately terminated by a no-fault divorce. The contraceptive mentality states that couples have a right to a union without the travails of raising more children than a modern consumerist society deems acceptable; it denies the unsettling truth that unless *eros* is allowed to go beyond itself and beget new life, its very nature is contradicted.\(^{25}\) The phenomenon of ‘same-sex marriage’ can be seen as a logical outcome of portraying marriage as a purely civil arrangement in which *eros* is disconnected from the *agape* which children entail. It is odd that Catholic Christianity is often criticized for upholding an unachievable, idealistic vision of marriage, when in fact it is a post-modern one which is guilty of idealism. It sees it better to have no marriage at all rather than a marriage in which the ideal of a relationship which makes few sacrificial demands on the ‘partners’ cannot be maintained.
While in his time St. Francis de Sales did not have to deal with such attacks on Christian marriage, his vision of the nature of the human person and human love provides the foundation for a profoundly realistic view of marriage. Marriage finds its origins in the human heart, which reaches out to an “other” in a self-communicative act of the will, which can grow into a mutual and indissoluble bond, which is consecrated in the sacrament of Christian matrimony. This bond then provides an unshakable framework for love to be played out in the praxis of marriage. It is a love that does not run from the imperfections of the cross, but will take hold and not let go of the beloved even when all other connections seem to break down, thereby becoming a bond of perfection.

2 Treatise, I, Bk. 1, Ch. 13, 88.
6 Treatise, I, Bk. 1, Ch. 10, 76.
7 Treatise, I, Bk. 1, Ch. 7, 67.
8 Treatise, I, Bk. 1, Ch. 1, 55.
9 Treatise, I, Bk. 1, Ch. 4, 60.
10 Treatise, I, Bk. 1, Ch. 7, 68.
11 Treatise, I, Bk. 1, Ch. 12, 90.
12 See Treatise, I, Bk. 1, Ch. 2-3, 57.
15 Wendy M. Wright, Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal & Francois de Sales (Stella Niagara, NY: DeSales Resource Center, 2001), 204.
16 See James J. Greenfield, Opening Remarks, Oblates of St. Francis de Sales Wilmington-Philadelphia Province Convocation/Retreat 2014 (DeSales University, Center Valley, PA, June 16, 2014).
20 Deus Caritas Est, 7.
21 Francis de Sales, Thy Will Be Done: Letters to Persons in the World (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1995), 42.
22 Francis de Sales to Rose Bourgeois, 15–18 April 1605, in Letters of Spiritual Direction, 117.
24 Wendy M. Wright and Joseph F. Power, introduction to Letters of Spiritual Direction, 60.
25 See Deus Caritas Est, 7.