How reading St. Francis de Sales has made me a better priest

January 24th, Feast of St. Francis de Sales

“Introduction to the Devout Life”, the spiritual classic in which St. Francis de Sales sets forth the life of devotion not so much for the consecrated religious or cleric but for the laity, is surely the most popular work of the Doctor of the Catholic Press. This is one of those very few books worth reading two hundred times and more. It serves as a trustworthy guide to sanctity.

Since my ordination to the priesthood (three and a half years ago), this little “Introduction” for lay people has had an immeasurable impact on my own approach to moral and spiritual theology – reading St. Francis de Sales has made me a better priest.

Personal holiness and virtue

“Introduction to the Devout Life” is divided into five parts:

1. Advice and practices to begin the life of devotion

2. On prayer

3. On the practice of the virtues

4. Counsels regarding certain ordinary temptations

5. Practices to renew and confirm the soul in devotion

St. Francis de Sales is most helpful to those who strive to practice regular and methodical mental prayer. If a true interior life is to be nurtured in the soul, some method of prayer is necessary (especially in those souls which have not reached the perfection of the unitive way). That method advocated in the “Introduction” is simple, easily employed, and filled with much wealth.

The Bishop of Geneva recommends the following:

Each period of prayer should contain a preparation, a consideration, affections and resolutions, and a conclusion. This method is outlined in detail in Book II, chapters two through seven.

What has been particularly helpful to me is the emphasis which St. Francis places upon affectations and resolutions. He teaches that, as the point of prayer is to increase love in the soul (by which love, the soul is truly united to God), affective movements of the will are to be encouraged above intellectual reflections. Although the understanding must necessarily call the mysteries of the faith to mind and propose them to the will, nevertheless the highest movements of prayer are certainly those acts of love which proceed from
Additionally, St. Francis de Sales teaches that it is important to always finish one’s prayer with some resolution to grow in virtue or avoid vice – and this is the practical Catholicism which is so greatly needed in our own day, and especially in diocesan priestly ministry.

His treatises on the virtues and on temptations have been most helpful to me as well – especially the chapters on true friendship (part III, chapter 19 [here]) and on the pleasures which come with temptations (part IV, chapter 6 [here]).

**Priestly ministry: Preaching**

The classical work of St. Francis de Sales has been especially helpful in my priestly ministry as preacher, confessor, and spiritual director. I will limit myself to only a very few of the many points in which “Introduction” has made me a better priest.

St. Francis’ use of metaphor has instructed me a great deal in terms of the methodology and style of preaching. From “Introduction”, I have found a real love for the use of metaphor and analogy in preaching.

While St. Francis’ own favorite metaphors involved bees, I will highlight two others which I myself have used in sermons.

De Sales makes a comparison between the people of Israel who, thinking it was too difficult, turned back and refused to enter the Promised Land (cf. Numbers 14) and those worldly persons who think the devout life to be difficult and wholly devoid of all delight. This metaphor is found in part I, chapter two [here], and I myself have used it for Ash Wednesday sermons on multiple occasions.

In another place, St. Francis speaks of a popular myth according to which any word which is carved upon an almond-seed will then be impressed upon all the fruit of that tree. He states that he does not look primarily to exterior but rather to interior mortifications to truly purify the soul – and thus he wishes that his motto “Live, Jesus!” would be impressed upon the almond-seed of our heart. (cf. part III, chapter 23 [here])

I have not only used these and many other metaphors in preaching and lectures, but my own style and use of analogy in general has been formed by that of the Doctor of the Catholic Press.

**Priestly ministry: Confession**

It is obvious enough that St. Francis’ discussion of virtue and vice as well as his counsel regarding various temptations would be most helpful to the confessor. In particular, I have often referred to his treatment of rash judgment (part III, chapter 28 [here]) and anger (part III, chapters 8 [here] and 9 [here]).

Further, his outline for spiritual practices to renew and foster devotion (the whole of part V) is extremely helpful in giving counsel to penitents who desire to move forward in the interior life.

In truth, I freely recommend “Introduction to the Devout Life” to many penitents as I believe that this book can easily be read and understood by most every soul who is formed in the basic catechetics of the faith. This book can serve as a quasi “spiritual director” for those who regularly frequent confession – as they will be able to ask their confessor for advice regarding the application of certain passages to their own lives.

**Priestly ministry: Spiritual direction**

St. Francis de Sales began to write the “Introduction” as a spiritual resource for those who had been entrusted to him in spiritual direction. Throughout the work, he addresses himself to a certain “Philothea” which is name meaning “Lover of God” and is meant to include any and every Christian soul.
While the original “Philothea” for whom “Introduction” was begun was a certain Madame de Charmoisy, St. Francis' most well known spiritual daughter is St. Jane Frances de Chantal. Among the many others, we might add that he also served as the spiritual father of his own very dear little sister, Jeanne.

In his own preface to the work [here], the Bishop of Geneva insists that every pastor (specifically, every Bishop) is obligated to take time and energy for the direction of individual souls. I have presented this in an earlier post [here] – without repeating the argument, I will simply mention that St. Francis has led me to be far more open to the direction of individual souls than I would have previously been.

On another level, I almost always will use “Introduction” within the context of direction as a major point of spiritual reading– usually extending two or three months of study (and I am very happy to take even more time). Discussion of “Introduction” is then the basis for at least some portion of each direction meeting. This is one of those books which ought nearly to be memorized, and I know of some who know the spiritual classic in the greatest detail.

Conclusion

“Introduction to the Devout Life” is a truly great book. Learning to love this work will confirm the soul in love of devotion.

If you have not yet read the classic of St. Francis de Sales with great care and attention – moreover, if you have not yet learnt to truly love this work – I would encourage you to set aside everything and anything else you are currently reading (with the exception of Sacred Scripture) and pick up this book. Read it slowly, for a book so rich deserves careful and extended consideration – no rush-job will suffice.

If you already love the “Introduction”, blessed are you indeed! Thank God for having brought you to this classic. Read it often. The Lord has given you a great grace. Thank him fervently for this blessing, and also remember often to be grateful for whomever it was that first taught you to love St. Francis de Sales.

St. Francis de Sales, Pray for us!