Pope John Paul II & St. Francis de Sales

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Introduction

The memory of Pope John Paul II, the pope who guided the church to the third millennium, inspires various feelings and reactions not only among Christians but among people the world over. The outstanding character of this Polish Pope has touched in various ways children and adults, the fragile and the strong, the poor and the rich. In a very real sense, John Paul II, as an exemplary follower of Christ, became like Saint Paul the Apostle “all things to all, to save at least some” (1Cor 9:22). Although an article cannot exhaust the whole character and spiritual dynamics of this late Pope, some of his writings show his interest in assimilating the Salesian character in his mission and vision during the 26 years of his pontificate. This article is an attempt to see how the Pope articulated Salesian convictions in his homilies, which he delivered during his visits to France in October 4-7, 1986 as well as in his letter on the fourth centenary of the Episcopal ordination of Saint Francis de Sales, which he addressed to Bishop Yves Boivineau of Annecy, France on November 23, 2002.

Concept of God

Pope John Paul II captured the Salesian concept of the love of God and presents a loving image of God to modern humanity. In an age where secularism and indifferentism manipulate people, the Pope invited all to experience a God, who is merciful, loving and caring. It is not the fear of evil and punishment that leads humanity to God, but His loving nature, His desire to encounter humanity in all its fragility. The Pope states it in the homily:

*Doctor of love,* Saint Francis de Sales has unceasingly emphasized the lively source of the covenant of God with man: God loves us, God accompanies us at each stage of life, with a
patient and faithful love; God puts in us His desire for what is good; an attraction towards what is beautiful and good. In His Providence, God gives us life to be made according to His image and His likeness. And God calls us to always partake of what constitutes the grandeur of His own life, perfect love. He accords us interior liberty; He renders us capable of tasting the certitude of being loved, and of making the firm resolution to respond to that love.

This great bishop also knew human weakness, his difficulty in responding in a constant faith to the message of love of the covenant. He knew that we often seek strength to prefer ourselves to any generous welcoming to a gift of God. That is why Francis de Sales was tireless in showing his brothers and sisters the patience and tenderness of God ready to pardon, to save. He does not cease to transmit the Good News of the Annunciation: the Son of the Most High born of Mary, comes to be united to humanity. In a distraught world, the presence of Jesus reopens the ‘wounds of love’, cures distressed hearts, offers a covenant of pardon and of renewal. In His infinite holiness, Jesus draws us along the way of holiness.¹

Like Francis de Sales, the pope understood that a world beset with secularism, individualism, and indifferentism could be motivated only by re-emphasizing the concept of ‘a loving God’ who is interested in each one of us. In tune with the Salesian outlook, John Paul II stresses the divine initiative in loving humanity. The Pope affirms that Saint Francis de Sales deepened our understanding of the ‘loving’ and ‘merciful’ nature of God: “A man of great goodness and kindness, who knew how to express God’s mercy and patience to those who came to speak with him, he taught an exacting but serene spirituality based on love, for loving God ‘is the sovereign happiness of the soul for this life and for eternity’. (Oeuvres, XV:180)”²

Upholding the teachings of Saint Francis de Sales, and personalizing them in his life, the Pope believes in the human inclination to do good and in our ‘natural attraction’ to what is beautiful.

Pastoral Spirit

Although it was not a favorable time for Francis in his ministry as a priest as well as a bishop due to the Protestant Reformation, he was a staunch defender of the Catholic faith. He upheld the Christian principles of being a good shepherd for his people. It is interesting how the Pope underscores the pastoral zeal of the gentle bishop of Geneva:

Francis de Sales loved the people whose pastor he was. In order to guide them along the ways of the Gospel, he dedicated himself entirely to the extent of allowing himself to be absorbed at every moment, in his life or in the course of his visits to the parishes. The priests found that he gave them a fraternal welcome, and he led them into that apostolic generosity which he himself practiced even to the limit of his strength. He insisted on celebrating Mass with his people and on frequently preaching the Word of God. He gladly taught catechism to the children. He manifested a patient charity in order to guide those who asked his counsel, and also, in order to help the poor, by living poorly himself. We have heard in the reading of Proverbs a verse that he put into practice: “It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor that to divide the spoil with the proud.” (16:19) He made himself available to anyone who asked him to hear confession, so much did he esteem the benefits of the sacraments of mercy.
As the Psalm says: “The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit” (34:18).

Pope John Paul II emphasizes the pastoral spirit of Francis de Sales and presents the Saint as a good pastor of his people. When we read this homily meditatively, we will understand that John Paul II reveals his very own heart to the modern world. In a way, John Paul II resembles Francis in his pastoral zeal and enthusiasm. His pastoral care for the young was manifested clearly in his participation in world youth day meetings and his interest to bring the young to the Church and to Gospel values. By this, the Pope wished to offer his vision of the authentic leadership for the modern world. Even when he was sick, his desire to go to Lourdes for the pilgrimage and to be with the sick was a great encouragement to them and an affirmation of his positive outlook on suffering and pain.

Pope John Paul II, during his message to all the bishops of France, delivered in Lyons, presented Francis de Sales, a pastor ‘completely available for his people,’ as a model for all the bishops. He expands on this idea in the letter in a more explicit fashion:

Taking as his model St. Charles Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, he [Francis de Sales] concentrated on spreading the teaching of the Council of Trent faithfully and creatively and on putting into practice its pastoral dispositions. He reorganized his diocese, which he visited twice in its entirety, suffering deeply from seeing the painful situation of Geneva, his Episcopal See, which had gone over to the Calvinist Reform. He took care of the formation of his priests, by having monthly conferences for them, so that he could give to the sheep without shepherds, merciful pastors capable of teaching the Christian mystery and of celebrating ever more worthily the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation.

By setting forth Francis as a model for bishops, the Pope reveals his mission and vision to impart his style of pastoral leadership in a creative way. Comparing the dynamics and orientation of these two leaders from two different epoch, we could see how John Paul II was a follower of Francis de Sales in his heart and spirit, though there is no direct indication of this in the writings of the Pope or elsewhere.

Missionary Zeal

The church manifests her missionary dimension in every epoch in different styles and manner. Francis’ missionary spirit gives ‘flesh and blood’ to gospel values and presents the covenantal relationship of the church with Christ in a dynamic and energetic way. Pope John Paul II had a missionary attitude, and the Pope grasped the missionary zeal of the gentleman saint who worked in the Chablais as a young priest to bring back Catholics from Calvinist teachings. Francis was creative and zealous in his missionary activities. Even when preaching was dangerous, he, together with his cousin Louis, walked hours to preach in the Calvinist area, and he used a prophetic method of spreading the Catholic faith in is epoch. He wrote small pamphlets explaining the catholic faith and distributed them secretly to the Christian families.
Emphasizing the priestly and Episcopal life of the Saint, the Pope calls him the ‘Apostle of the Chablais’. The Pope evokes this experience in a creative way:

In his pastoral activity, Francis de Sales had an acute sense of mission which is incumbent upon every bishop. He knew that in this mission, the service of unity is a priority. He had to overcome a deep division among the Christians of his region. In the climate that prevailed at that time, he achieved it with faith, all his love, and all his generosity. May the Lord inspire our dialogue today with our still separated brothers [and sisters]. May He affirm in us a common wish for reconciliation in truth and in charity, so that we may soon find the unity so much desired.

Although external danger did not directly exist for the Pope, he reveals his very missionary heart, a heart which desired unity, a heart which loved inter-religious dialogue, a heart which dreamed ecumenism. In a talk to the young people of France, on October 5, 1986, the Pope explained the great misery of the division among the Christians; and he urged the young people to show fidelity to the church by searching for love and truth in the manner of Saint Francis de Sales.

The Phoenix of Bishops

The Pope presents the saint’s leadership qualities in various aspects of his life and invites modern Christian leaders to see a paradigm of leadership in the humble bishop of Geneva.

Adviser of popes and princes, endowed with great spiritual pastoral and diplomatic qualities, Francis de Sales was a man of unity in a period when divisions created a wound in the Church’s side. He especially took care to re-establish the unity of his diocese and maintain the communion of faith, founding his approach on confidence in God, the charity that can do all things, and ascetical lifestyle and prayer, as he underlined in a truly programmatic address after his ordination to the priesthood, for this his how one must live Christian discipline and behave as God’s true children (cf. Harangue pour la prevote: Oeuvres, VII:99ff.). Later, he explained the true meaning of theological charity: “Charity is the love of friendship, a friendship of preference, a preferential love, but an incomparable preference, sovereign and supernatural, that is as a sun in the soul to enlighten it with its rays, in all the spiritual faculties to protect them, in all one’s powers to moderate them, but in the will, as on its seat, to dwell there and to make it cherish and love its God above all things.” (cf. The Love of God, II:22).

In appreciating the spiritual life of the great Bishop of Geneva, the Pope underlines the saint’s emphasis on charity and presents him as a model for modern Christian leadership.

In the message of the Pope to the Young, he asserts the role of bishops and the Pope: They assure the uninterrupted transmission of the life of Christ since the Apostles. They are the ‘guardians of the Gospel’ (cf. 2 Tim 1:14); responsible for Christian unity in the Church, their fidelity in the faith and in their missionary impulse, and responsible for access to the sacraments.
They are the shepherds given by Jesus to us. Saint Francis de Sales was an extraordinary bishop and courageous pastor. Again on the following day during his message to all the bishops of France, the Pope asserts that Francis “represents for us one exemplary model…we could better invite ourselves into the School of the Saint of Annecy, who inspires us through his experience of the Episcopal ordinations: ‘God took me to himself to give me back to the people, that is to say, He has converted me from what I was for myself into what I will be for them. (Oeuvres, XV:312-13)”

John Paul II shows himself to be a modern Francis de Sales in his leadership ministry. During his pontificate, the Pope underlined these aspects and his approach to other religious leaders; his ‘mea culpa’ on behalf of all the Catholics, is remarkable. The Pope acknowledged the fragility of the Catholics and asked pardon for various past events on a number of occasions: divisions among the Christian churches, The Inquisition, Relations with Islam, the Mafia, the Oppression of American Indians and the Black people, the Persecutions against the Jews, the Wars of religion, the Eastern Schism, the Slave Trade. The Pope’s courageous act of asking forgiveness as well as his own example of forgiving his assassin Mohammad Ali Agca in view of establishing the relationship based on love reflects well the favorite Salesian theme of charity and humility, which stresses gentleness towards the other. The Pope asserts in his letter Francis “was particularly concerned to help his clergy and faithful discover that penance is a moment of encounter with the love of Our Lord, who welcomes all who come to him humbly asking forgiveness. He also took care to reform the monastic orders, as he wrote to Pope Paul V in November 1606 (Oeuvres, XXIII:325).” Both Francis de Sales and John Paul II share the ‘rare character’ of upholding Gospel values, and thus the Pope could also be called a ‘Phoeniz’ or a ‘rare bird’ for the modern era.

Following Jesus

Pope John Paul II stresses the relevance of the teaching of the gentle saint and presents Francis as a committed follower of Jesus. According to the Pope, Francis leads us to meditate on the life of Jesus and to remain close to the Lord. In the Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis writes in the following way: “we shall learn with the help of his grace to will, to speak and to act like Him.” Francis again invites us to carefully pronounce the holy name of Jesus by giving to the invocation all its force: It is essential that this be through divine love alone which, without any other, expresses Jesus Christ in our life by imprinting him in our heart. Francis was always faithful in his relationship with the Church. The Pope brings out the Salesian influence on the Council of Vatican II.

Priest, then Bishop of the Diocese, Francis de Sales lived in an era when it was essential to find a new impulse. He contributed vigorously to putting into action the reforms of the Council of Trent concluded a little before his birth. In this regard, we can profit from his example, twenty years after Vatican Council II, even if the circumstances are very different: its reforms will achieve their effort only if they are accompanied by a profound spiritual renewal.

The Pope presents Francis as a precursor of the Vatican II and categorically explains how the humble saint executed his reforms for the renewal of the church.
Universal call to holiness

According to Francis, devotion and spirituality can be lived in any life styles and circumstances. He emphasized that all are called to holiness. The Pope is also convinced of this idea and stresses it by inviting all to experience the depth of Christian devotion in every state in life.

In Francis de Sales we admire a man of the Church penetrated with divine life. One might say that he is a veritable wise man, realizing what the Proverbs say: “The wise of heart is called perceptive and pleasant speech increases persuasiveness. Wisdom is a fountain of life to one who has it.” (16:21-22) This mystic drew daily, in intimacy with the Savior, an astonishing capacity for leading his brothers [and sisters] towards the perfect life, by knowing how to understand the most diverse persons. His influence stems largely from the fact that everyone felt himself respected in his particular situation. He proposed total evangelical exactness. He demonstrated this in his interactions with men and women, laity and religious, young and old, the married and the celibate, the rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, princes and peasants; soldiers and merchants. To all he revealed the profound accord of his interior liberty with the will of God. To everyone he addressed the call to holiness according to one’s condition and disposition. This wise man who spoke of himself “as only a man, nothing more” (Oeuvres, XIII: 330) was so close to his brothers that he knew how to share with all of them the very wisdom of God.20

During his pontificate, John Paul II elevated many people to sainthood, and it is interesting to note that he has canonized many from various states in life to concretely affirm holiness is possible in every state of life.21 As with Francis, the Pope’s Christian humanism is noteworthy in his relationships, in particular the special attention he paid to the weak and the fragile. This was especially manifested by his desire to bless the children in the crowd, even at times when it placed him at risk.

The Pope quoted Francis de Sales in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortion Christifideles Laici and presents Salesian spirituality as most suitable for the laity: Francis “presents in a simple yet insightful way the vocation of all Christians to holiness while emphasizing the specific form with which individual Christians fulfill it.”22 Again, in his letter, Pope John Paul II underlines Francis’ strong belief in the universal call to holiness:

Doctor of divine love, Francis de Sales did not rest until the faithful accepted God’s love, to live fully in it, turning their hearts to God an uniting themselves with him (cf. Traite de l’amour de Dieu: Oeuvres, IV: 40ff.). This is how, under his direction, many Christians walked on the path to holiness; he showed them that all are called to live an intense spiritual life, whatever their situation and profession, for “the Church is a garden filled with infinite flowers where there are flowers of different sizes, colors, fragrances: in brief, of different perfections. For they each have their value, their grace, and their substance, and make a most
The Pope clearly states that no facet of life is alien to Francis de Sales in reaching holiness. All the ordinary actions have value in themselves and can bring us to holiness. The Church is broad enough to accept different ways of life to acquire personal holiness.

**Diplomacy and communication**

The Pope stresses Francis’ adaptability and common sense. In the modern world of terrorism and religious fanaticism, John Paul II seems to be a new Francis de Sales in his diplomatic way of relating to others as well as in his method of communicating by the way he dwells on these qualities in the saint. This is the way the Pope describes these rare qualities:

Endowed with a great discernment in individual encounters, Francis de Sales also entered into the affairs and the debates of his time, with a moderation that invited confidence…Among the saints who have brought the Gospel message to their contemporaries in so many ways, Francis de Sales sides with those who have known how to find a language marvelously adapted. We would say today that he was a man of communication. In his letters and in his books he holds our attention by a style in which his spiritual experience is transparent at the same time as his profound knowledge of man. Patron of Journalists, of those whose mission is to write, may he inspire their work with a lucid knowledge of those whom they are addressing, in fraternal respect for those with whom they share the truth.  

Like Francis, Pope John Paul was a man of communication for the modern era. By writing many books on theology and philosophy, the pope proved his spirit and mission though his writings. Pope John Paul II’s message for the 39th Day of Social Communication which was due to be held May 8, 2005, on the theme: ‘The Communications Media: at the service of understanding among peoples’ was made public on January 24, 2005, the feast of St. Francis de Sales patron saint of journalists.  

It is worth noting that the homily which he gave on the feast day of the Holy Rosary concluded with an invitation to follow the Salesian way of holiness:

May Salesian wisdom, wherein intellectual qualities and holiness are joined to those of a friendly human wisdom, permit you to illuminate in truth the questions of our times, of respecting the vocation of each one there where God had planted it, and of making heard the call to enter by grace the covenant with the eternal wisdom.  

The Pope highlights here the special blending of intellectual qualities and holiness. It is also an invitation to understand the divine initiative in every vocation and to allow oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit.
Two personalities: ‘Live Jesus’ model

Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) lived in different centuries, in different socio-political, economic, and religious epochs. Both were born and brought up in different societies, served the church and humanity in different milieu. However, what attracted people of these two different centuries—both Christians and non-christians, young and old, rich and poor, believers and non-believers is not just simply what they wrote and said, but what they did, and what they kept as a legacy throughout their lives and leadership. Both of them traveled a lot, visited various groups of people, and spent time to mend diplomatic relationships. Both were empathetic and had large vision: ready to embrace various cultures and differences, and adaptable to accept the need of the people. For example, Francis was ready to eat a piece of meat on a Lenten Friday evening just to encourage another hungry person to feed his stomach. Pope John Paul II was sensitive and ready to leave his shoes behind when he visited a Mosque in Syria as well as when he was at Gandhi’s Samadhi (tomb of Gandhi), in Delhi, India. Francis de Sales recommended Saint Jane de Chantal and the sisters of the Visitation to follow the French Translation of the prayer book. John Paul II welcomed, accepted and encouraged African, Asian and Native American music, and traditional dances at St. Peter’s Basilica and where ever he went.

Both the Saint and the Pope stand as unique leaders who guided the Church either the local or the Universal in different millennium with vigor and spirit. Both emphasize the ongoing-formation of priests, renewal of religious life and participation and collaboration with the laity. As men of communication, and men of conviction, both prove their leadership in diplomacy. Their keen interest in guiding others to devotion and virtuous life, accent on prayer, stress on empowering leaderships are few examples of similarity. Their practice of the virtues of humility towards God and gentleness towards others makes a striking resemblance between these two personalities. In setting forth the spirituality of Francis de Sales, the Pope made it a point to mention his two predecessors and their love and interest in the humble saint. He mentions Pope John XXIII and his book *Journal of the Soul* to stress the saint’s influence in the life of this pontiff. 27 Again he acknowledges Pope Paul VI’s *Sabaudiae Gemma* (The Gem of Savoy) in honor of Francis de Sales. 28 Although Pope John Paul does not extensively cite Saint Francis de Sales in his writings, the pope shares a certain type of Salesian vision in his life and mission.

Conclusion

Pope John Paul II canonized more saints than any other pope. The new saints came from the New World, from the modern age and from every walk of ordinary life. The Pope recognized that people need to draw their role models from exemplary people they can identify with—people, in many cases, from their own time and place. Pope John Paul II has presented to the modern world saints in great number and great variety, in gender, nationality, way of life, and spirituality. We feel that we can relate to these saints, who lived a spirituality that seems attainable. Finding holiness in every state of life is precisely an influence from Saint Francis de Sales. John Paul’s canonization legacy affirms the Salesian concept of the universal call to holiness. It is also an invitation to know that people who lived and walked among us on our streets and villages are saints. In other words, together with Francis de Sales, the Pope asserts
that people just like us, with all their human fragilities, limitations and weaknesses, can be holy
and devout people. The saint and the Pope underline that we too can be saintly and holy; we too
can have a pastoral spirit as they had; we too can be precious and rare in our outlook; and we too
can have a dynamic missionary spirit.

from the French original are the author’s unless otherwise noted.
2 John Paul, *Letter of John Paul II on the fourth Centenary of the Episcopal Ordination of St. Francis de Sales,*
3 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi,* 180. Though the original the citation from the psalm is marked as
33[34]:19, it is changed according to the RSV English Translation.
4 The Pope convened the World Youth Day and actively participated in all the gathering during his life time: In
Rome (1985), Buenos Aires, Argentina (1987), Santiago de Compostela, Spain (1989), Czestochowa, Poland
Toronto, Canada (2002). Pope even wished and agreed to go to Cologne, Germany (2005).
5 Pope John Paul traveled to Lourdes on August 14-15, 2004 to celebrate the feast of the Assumption and to mark
the 150th anniversary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. It was his 104th foreign apostolic trip and the
seventh time he had been to France. His last visit was in August 1997 for World Youth Day. He was the first pope
ever to visit Lourdes when he went there in 1983 as a pilgrim during the Holy Year of the Redemption. When he
instituted the World Day of the Sick in 1992, Pope John Paul chose February 11, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes,
as the date on which this day would be marked each year. The first world day took place in 1993 in Lourdes. Cf.
6 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi.* 164-65. (Message to the Bishops of France).
8 Dirk Koster, Francis de Sales, (Noorden: Bert Post, 2000), 51-77.
10 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi,* 180-81.
11 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi,* 90 (Message to the Bishops of France).
12 Francis de Sales was consecrated ‘Prince Bishop of Geneva’ on 8 December 1602, and King Henry IV honored
him with the title ‘the phoenix of Bishops’, because, he said, ‘he is a rare bird on this earth’. The Pope mentions this
also in his letter.
14 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi,* 92.
15 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi,* 164 (Message to the Bishops of France).
16 See Francis Moget, Pope John Paul II: *A Model of Reconciliation in the world of Today,* *Indian Journal of
18 Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life,* trans. by Anthony Mookestottam et al, (Bangalore; SFS
19 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi,* 180.
20 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi,* 181. The Pope gave only the number of the Letter, but for coherence, I
have added the reference of the original citation.
21 During his pontificate of 26 years, Pope John Paul II canonized 464 saints in 48 celebrations Thirty-five of these
celebrations were in Vatican; the other 13 of them were elsewhere. Cf. http://www.vatican.va/saints.htm.
22 Jean Paul II Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici,* No. 56.
24 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi,* 181-82.
26 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi,* 184.
27 Jean Paul II. *Restez fermes dans la foi,* 164.