THE INTRODUCTION TO THE DEVOUT LIFE AS SPIRITUAL CLASSIC

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If one were to define a spiritual classic, as does historian Arthur Holder, as a document that has made a profound difference in the lives of generations of readers across time and space, Francis de Sales’s Introduction to the Devout Life would surely qualify.¹ This slim volume, intended for the Genevan bishop’s mainly female lay readership has, since its initial publication in 1609, appeared in over 400 editions, been translated into numerous languages, excerpted, and creatively adapted in different forms. This last process of adaptation continues today in French, as is seen by Un monde à aimer by Fr. Michel Tournade, O.S.F.S., and in English, as evidenced by such recently published adapted versions as Presbyterian Bernard Bangley’s Authentic Devotion and Cistercian William Meninger’s The Committed Life.²

Many readers are no doubt aware that it is the Introduction that, during his lifetime and well into the twentieth century, secured for the Savoyard bishop his literary reputation. Additionally, it is the work with which he is most commonly identified. While his contributions to the tradition are many and notable—he became a model reforming bishop, was an exemplary spiritual guide, a theorist and practitioner of spiritual friendship, an exponent of devout Christian humanism, a noteworthy preacher, the co-founder of an innovative women’s congregation (the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary), and chief architect of what would become regarded as a distinctive school of spirituality—it is his little
volume, the *Introduction*, compiled from the letters of advice he penned to the likes of young Louise Chastel, Madame de Charmoisy, that has indeed made a profound difference in the lives of generations of readers across time and space.

In the centuries before de Sales, there certainly had been intensive movements of lay spirituality. For example, the medieval mendicant Franciscan and Dominican Orders emerged complete with third (tertiary) orders comprised of lay followers. In the same era, the Beguines and the *beatus*, loose-knit spiritual movements of European laywomen, came into being. The fourteenth century saw the rise of the Modern Devotion (*devotio moderna*), which had a strong lay component. But these movements, while lay, still bore the imprint of the monastic and ascetic spirituality that had long dominated Christendom. They tended to focus on monastic spiritual practices modified for lay consumption but not specifically emerging *from* it. Explicitly lay spiritualities that were rooted in lay life would emerge only in the early modern era, some of them in tandem with the evolving Protestant reform movements. In Roman Catholic circles, the Society of Jesus refined the insights of its founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), and offered them to an elite lay population—to the men trained in the Society’s schools. Ignatian spirituality proposed a vision of the Christian life that was well suited both to its Jesuit promoters and to laymen desirous of “finding God in all things,” and engaging in works of all sorts “for the greater glory of God.” But if in its first centuries the Ignatian spirit inspired women, it was mostly as a foundation for religious community, not as an inspiration for an ordinary laywoman’s life.³

It would be left to Bishop de Sales, trained as a youth and directed by Jesuits throughout his life, to articulate for the early modern Catholic world a profound spiritual vision of ordinary work and family life. While Francis drew deeply from the springs of traditional prayer and asceticism and was adept in Ignatian ways, he did more than refurbish older models. He would re-conceptualize the notion of spiritual calling, placing a person’s “state in life” squarely in the center of that call. A wife and mother was called to deeper intimacy with God not *despite of* or in
conflict with her family responsibilities, but precisely in the midst of them. Her “state in life” was her primary call. The faithful cultivation of love of spouse and children was not subordinate to her love of God. Nor did it take her away from God, who is love. Francis was wont to remind his readers that they do not have two hearts, one that loves God and one that loves others, but only one heart created to and for Love.

The Salesian sense of the divine-human encounter was deeply incarnational. A woman or man’s response to the divine lover, for which the human heart was created, was understood to take place both vertically—in the intimacy of prayer and reception of the sacraments—and horizontally—in between people, in family, friendship, preaching, teaching, guidance, and pastoral exchange. Hearts were thought to speak to hearts. The heart of God and human hearts, as well as human hearts together, Francis believed were linked in profound communion. Of course, he knew that, like all people, a wife and mother or a husband and family provider was in need of intentional formation. Hearts needed to turn toward their source and end. Hearts needed to be gentled to be able to perceive and then practice the arts of deepening devotion within the context of ordinary lay states of life. Thus the Savoyard director outlined for Madame de Charmoisy and his other “Philotheas” practical, commonsense advice on how this turning of the heart might be realized.

The Introduction’s progression—from its first meditative exercises designed to foster an awareness of God’s goodness and encourage response, to its consideration of the growth of virtue, or habits of the heart, especially realizable in the day-to-day duties of ordinary life, to its wise advice on how to sustain and nurture these habits, and the difficulties that may be encountered in the process—is masterful in its brevity, fulsome ness, and compassionate realism. It fed the intense spiritual hunger of the early modern Catholic laity. That it became an instant best seller speaks to this.

Similarly, the Introduction once again fed that newly emergent hunger in the nineteenth century. What has been called the Salesian Pentecost, a widespread revival of interest in de Sales and his spiritual legacy, occurred in Catholic Europe in the wake of the political, cultural,
and social upheavals of the French and other national revolutions and in the context of new affective religious sensibilities. New communities, including the Oblate Sisters and Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales, and the Don Bosco Salesian family of congregations—all these were established alongside lay associations such as the Daughters of St. Francis de Sales and the Association of St. Francis de Sales, which at its height is reported to have numbered over 1,000,000 members. This latter lay group, associated with names such as Marie de Sales Chappuis, Louis Brisson, Louis Gaston de Séguir, and Gaspard Mermillod, drew their Salesian spirit primarily from the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.\(^5\)

### Beyond Popularity and Endurance

At this point, we might ask: are popularity and the ability to capture the imaginations of significant and heretofore unaddressed segments of a population the sole marks of a religious classic? To answer this we might turn to the seminal exploration of the classic genre that comes from the pen of American theologian David Tracy. In his well-known 1981 work, *The Analogical Imagination*, Tracy exhaustively considers the various dimensions of the religious classic beyond simple popularity or endurance.\(^6\) For him, the two marks of the classic are: first, permanence, and, second, an “excess of meaning.” “Certain expressions of the human spirit,” Tracy suggests, “so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some sort of normative status.”\(^7\)

In his discussion, Tracy insists that classics as he defines them need not conform to classicist norms. But he also does not want to reduce all artifacts to their limited social and cultural contexts; even if there may be plural “styles” of religious classics from different cultural worlds, some expressing the sensibilities of the cultural elite and some coming from counter-cultural or popular contexts, still there is something more enduring than the contextual aspects of a classic. Instead, Tracy, following German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, uses the analogy of the human encounter with a great work of art that, he insists, may be seen as an expression of Truth itself. "We find [in the work of art] . . .
some disclosure of reality in a moment that must be called one of recognition which surpasses, provokes, challenges, shocks and eventually transforms us . . . upsets conventional opinions, expands a sense of the possible.”

Nor does Tracy want to reduce this encounter with a classic by using psychological, theological, or sociological forms of reductionism that do not respect art’s autonomy. Art, and, by extension, the classic, he believes, has an integrity of its own that cannot be explained away.

Can we apply this more critical definition offered by Tracy to our Salesian text? Looking back historically, we might say that the Introduction may certainly have functioned in such a compelling way for its first generations of readers. The “shock of recognition” may have been that experienced by many of the Philotheas whose hearts were alive to that innate restless desire that St. Augustine so wonderfully gave voice to in the sixth century: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in You” (Confessions, Book 1, chapter 1). In a spiritual tradition that had long privileged the restlessness of those able to “leave the world,” a word such as the Genevan Bishop offered must indeed have been a disclosure, a recognition of the truth of the human heart. That the love of family and friends, which occupy the energies and form the core identity of most laypersons, was suddenly deemed neither lesser than, nor false, nor in opposition to the love of God, must have been liberating as well as confirming of the felt truth of life.

But what of today? Certainly there remain laypersons in the Catholic pews who have never had their deepest heart-restlessness identified or affirmed, nor heard their ordinary lives and loves juxtaposed so positively to the love of the divine. But many lay people have. The Second Vatican Council, 300+ years after Francis de Sales made it explicit in the Introduction to the Devout Life, affirmed that there is a universal call to holiness. The fifth chapter of Lumen gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church situates that universal call squarely at the center of the mystery of the Church. All members of the Body of Christ, each in his or her own “state of life,” are called to live out the unique ways in which he or she participates in the holiness that belongs to Christ and Christ’s church. All persons, in whatever life-circumstance,
are part of the dynamic, spirit-initiated energy that surges through the Body of Christ. Cardinal Suenens, himself an influential figure at Vatican II, spoke publicly of Francis de Sales’s influence on this part of the Council deliberations.⁹

That universal call, to be understood in a truly Salesian manner, and I trust here I am being faithful to the Savoyard saint’s vision, can never be thought of as uniformity. Holiness itself is never generic. Not only does the holiness realized in religious life not mimic the holiness incarnated in marriage and family, but there is also no one way of being a religious, or one way of being a wife, or a priest, or a worker. There is no generic holiness. Certainly, there are some defining features of sanctity shaped by one’s state in life. But the Salesian dictum, “Be what you are and be that well,”¹⁰ must be taken seriously. On the surface, the saying may seem charming, even obvious, but it assumes a philosophical world in which each created being has a unique, indeed particular, gift or charism that no one else can exactly replicate. Thus the universal call, so prophetically anticipated by Francis centuries prior to its magisterial enunciation in the third quarter of the twentieth century, is also a call for each woman and man to live generously and adventurously into the mystery of her or his unfolding life led by the Spirit. If this intuition is not “disclosive,” if it does not cause, to use David Tracy’s words, a “shock of recognition,” it is hard to imagine what might, especially heard against the backdrop of a culture—religious or secular—that foregrounds conformity and superficiality.

**Beyond Prophetic or Revelatory for Its Age**

But let us push a little farther into Tracy’s dense reflection on religious classics. He goes on to make even more substantive claims about the religious classic as an event of disclosure expressive of what he terms “the limit-of, horizon-to, ground-of” side of religion.¹¹ A classic is experienced as “from the whole . . . the whole being sensed as an undeniable power not of one’s own, articulated not in a language of certainty and clarity but of scandal and mystery.”¹² The classic, in Tracy’s estimation, functions to draw us into the divine mystery itself.
An admission is in order here. As much as I admire the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, as much as I applaud the way in which it has opened eyes and hearts of generations of lay Christians to the inherent holiness of their own lives, I cannot easily say that when I read Tracy on the experience of the "limit-of, horizon-to, ground-of" religion, I necessarily experienced de Sales's little book that way at first reading. My personal encounter with such an undeniably "classic" piece of religious literature came in reading Augustine's *Confessions* decades ago in a completely secular context. As a history major at California State University at Los Angeles, I was assigned to read the *Confessions* as documentary evidence of early medieval culture. Although I had heard the bishop of Hippo's name, I knew nothing about him or his theology. As I read I became fascinated by his story but when I stumbled upon the opening sentences of Book 8, chapter 27, I was thunderstruck.

I have learnt to love You late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love You late! You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself and, disfigured as I was, I fell upon the lovely things of Your creation. You were with me but I was not with You... You called to me; You cried aloud to me; You broke the barrier of my deafness. You shone upon me; Your radiance enveloped me; You put my blindness to flight... You touched me, and I am enflamed by love of Your peace.¹³

That rhapsodic Pine-Coffin translation awakened something only faintly audible in my heart. Suddenly as though the volume was amplified, the music became clear. I recognized myself. I had come home. The ultimate infinite horizon of experience was revealed. The passage never fails to stir me when I return to it.

As I now read the *Introduction to the Devout Life* over again and as I recall my first encounters with the text, I do not immediately feel that deep surge of recognition that I felt encountering Augustine's classic
text. Appreciation, yes. Acknowledgement, yes. So I must ask: is the Savoyard’s small book basically a period piece? Are its elements, its rhetoric, its applicability dated? Does it speak primarily to a pre-Vatican II world? Or to a world that has not yet appropriated the insights of that Council? Certainly there are specific passages of the text that, in their original form, are anachronistic. Advice about how to pray the Rosary during the Latin Mass is not applicable to an era where full, active, and conscious participation in the liturgy is expected of Catholics. Nor, in a world of grotesque and destructive economic and social injustices, do de Sales’s considerations about how to practice interior poverty while being materially wealthy stand up without comment and interpretation.\textsuperscript{14} The topic of contemporary adaptations aside, the question remains: does the \textit{Introduction} in its original form genuinely resonate in the manner that Tracy suggests is constitutive of classic status? Can it be considered so merely in the sense that it has been previously meaningful and popular across the generations and time and space? Or is there something about it that reaches into the very marrow of human religious apprehension? Does it take us to the horizon, the limit, the ground? That place where definitions and clarifications fall short, where wonder and awe and unknowing move us closer into the mystery of God?

Here I want to turn to Philip Sheldrake, who, in his recent essay on interpreting religious classics in the \textit{Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality}, draws upon Tracy but also insists upon a critical dialogue as a prerequisite for reading any historical text.\textsuperscript{15} Classics, Sheldrake insists, precisely because they are classic, will always need further interpretation in view of the fact that they must be renewed in order to be applied to particular and changing circumstances. Classics are what Sheldrake calls “committed texts,” and while they tend to disclose some essential compelling experience, they also offer a discreet and \textit{particular} and contextually-shaped interpretation of events, teachings, and people.\textsuperscript{16} A text in its original form and context may be considered “revelatory,” but, in fact, is not exhausted by what is on the page. It is true that we should seek to know what it was that Francis de Sales meant
when he wrote, and that we should be careful historians in that we will not want to grossly misinterpret his meaning. Yet it is also true, and contemporary hermeneutical theory alerts us to this, that interpretation is not merely an archeological activity. As Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams puts it, “the locus of revelation is the text as it stands in interaction with the reader.”¹⁷ A classic text, then, is perceived as such, as classic, precisely because people encounter, are moved by, and experience the text in a compelling way.

While rooted in the author’s original insight, the reception and interpretation of a classic text is an ongoing and unfolding process. Sheldrake, referencing Gadamer, asserts that classic texts have an excess of meaning beyond the subjective intentions of the author which allows the classic to come alive in changing times, places, and circumstances.

In the dialogue between text and reader the aim is to fuse the horizons of both in an interpretation that is always new. A classic may allow a genuinely new interpretation, yet the reader is also provoked... into new self-understanding because of the encounter. Thus a spiritual classic is not a timeless artifact that demands mere repetition. Understanding the text implies a constant reinterpretation by people who question and listen from within their own historical circumstances.¹⁸

This, I think, is where adaptations fit in. It also follows then that a genuine classic is never fully exhausted but continues to reveal that “excess of meaning” in differing ways even when the original text is not modified nor adapted.

But there is more to say. Sheldrake also alerts us to the “hidden text” that stands behind any given historical document. One example he cites is the Constitutions of the Jesuit Order. Behind the document that governs the Society of Jesus is the assumed revelatory experience of the Spiritual Exercises. When the hidden text is acknowledged, the Constitutions become not merely a legal document, but a flexible attempt
to offer a way of living out of the experience of the Ignatian Exercises in a communitarian and ministerial form.  

There is a hidden text behind the Introduction to the Devout Life as well. In fact, as suggested, there is an entire conceptual world. And this, I would venture, gives the document its classic status in the full sense that Tracy suggests. That hidden text is discovered partly in Francis's great Treatise on the Love of God. It is partially disclosed in his voluminous correspondence, partly glimpsed in his Conferences given to the fledgling Visitation community, and suggested in the remembered gestures and sayings that his contemporaries have preserved for us. The Salesian “world of hearts,” as I have come to think of it, is the hidden vision behind the Introduction. That world consists of the heart of God and human hearts, and human hearts together, linked through the crucified, gentle, humble heart of Jesus (cf. Matthew 11:29). This world of hearts is a vision of a rhythmic, pulsing, transformative exchange of love and life that participates in the dynamism of the Trinity itself, that cherishes who we uniquely are, and prompts us to “be that well.” This hidden “text,” expressed through the gracious rhetoric, the inviting turn of phrase, the beauty of the imagery, and the gentle yet firm instructions, is palpably present behind the specific methods and practices outlined in the Introduction. Bishop de Sales, who drew people to him by speaking and interacting heart to heart, is present in his penned words, as he invites his Philotheas into the world of hearts and the Love that animates his own heart.

One final dimension of the Introduction’s hidden life must also be noted. Like the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, the Introduction is a text that is not designed primarily to be read. It is a text intended to be performed. It is, in that sense, essentially a recipe book. And it is up to each cook in her or his own kitchen to create the actual meal whose ingredients and combination are outlined in the recipe. A recipe for strawberry tart can only be actualized by putting on an apron, picking out, washing, hulling, slicing and cooking strawberries, by sifting actual flour, mixing it with liquid, rolling out the dough and baking the assembled ingredients. When this has been done, and only then, can the tart
be savored. So it is with a \textit{performative} text. It can only really be experienced as it is incarnated in the lives of the women and men who find that it moves and enables them to put on their own aprons, roll up their own sleeves, and begin the messy, incarnational work of bringing into being, in a particular and unique way, the good word hidden in the many words on the page. That world of hearts, human and divine, is not simply a good idea, a theory, or a theological abstraction. It is a reality that must be enfleshed and communicated. Only then can its “classic” status be affirmed in the persons who have lived more fully, generously, and lovingly because of their encounter with the text.

In conclusion, in any number of ways that we might care to think about “religious classics,” Francis de Sales's \textit{Introduction to the Devout Life} may, in fact, appropriately be considered among the classics of the Christian tradition. Most obviously, it has been vastly popular and made an impact on the lives of generations of readers in different times and places. It has also enabled previously unaddressed segments of the Christian community, laity and women in particular, to awaken to the deep possibilities of faith in the context of their ordinary walks of life. In this, the \textit{Introduction} prophetically anticipated Vatican II’s universal call to holiness and planted the seed for that seminal magisterial teaching. Additionally, while the text of the \textit{Introduction} may not always in and of itself feel today as radical or revelatory as it might once have, it, nonetheless, continues to reveal itself as having an “excess of meaning.” New adaptations arise out of personal encounters with the text, the interaction \textit{between} the contemporary reader and the author continues to be wonderfully fruitful. Sometimes this occurs in the form of contemporary adaptations, sometimes not. But, perhaps most importantly, the text itself continues to draw readers into the fuller, and emphatically revelatory, hidden world behind its words, the Salesian world of hearts. Moreover, it invites her or him to move beyond reading to performance. It helps him to become the person he was intended by God to be, he is moved not only to be what he is but to \textit{be that well}. She is enabled to so internalize the deep, compelling wisdom that the classic text offers that she, in her turn, becomes a living classic text herself.
NOTES


3. The example of Mary Ward (1585–1645), foundress of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary or the Loreto Sisters, is an early case in point.


7. Ibid., 108.

8. Ibid.


11. Tracy, 163.

12. Ibid., 173.


14. I have discussed the issue of critical reading of historical spiritual texts in the introduction to my Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God, 2nd ed. (Stella Niagara, N.Y.: De Sales Resource Center, 2005), 17-28. Elsewhere, in a more straightforward manner than in this essay, I have treated the Introduction as a classic spiritual text. For this, see Christian Spirituality: The Classics, 233-56.


16. Ibid., 465.


19. Ibid., 469-70.

20. This world of hearts is visually expressed most clearly in the emblematic tradition that Fr. Joseph Chorpenning discusses in the present volume. See also Adrien Gambart’s Emblem Book (1664): The Life of St. Francis de Sales in Symbols, with a study by Elisabeth Stopp, ed. Terence O’Reilly, with an essay by Agnès Guiderdoni-Bruslé (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph University Press, 2005), and