Chapter 11

“I SHALL ALWAYS TAKE THE SIDE OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE”: HOW THE SPIRITUALITY OF SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES SUPPORTS HUMAN RESILIENCE DURING BEREAVEMENT

Daniel P. Wisniewski
DeSales University, DeSales University, Center Valley, PA, US

This chapter is dedicated in memory of Rebecca A. Dermanjian (1992-2011), and to her parents, Millie and Ken, and her brother Shane, who together as a family, have shown me the true meaning of human resilience.

ABSTRACT

In recent studies, human resilience has been suggested and supported through research studies as an alternative to a stage process of recovery from grief (e.g., Kübler-Ross’s five stages). An ability to maintain a “stable equilibrium” in the aftermath of loss, resilience has been shown to be the norm rather than the exception. The spirituality of Saint Francis de Sales, the sixteenth-century Savoyard bishop and saint, resonates well with resilience in coping. In particular, Francis’s belief in divine providence supports resilient behavior as evidenced by his personal response to the deaths of family members and supported by his spiritual writings. This chapter aims to highlight how Salesian spirituality converges with human resilience to offer a positive and healthy response to loss and grief.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American society has appropriated a stage process to the grief experienced after the death of close family members and friends. Most notable are the five stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.
(1969). While grief work centered on a movement through such phases of bereavement is commonly accepted, an alternative to such a recovery process has been suggested and supported by recent studies: human resilience. Characterized as the ability to maintain a “stable equilibrium,” resilience has been shown by George A. Bonanno (2004) and others to be a more common, positive experience in response to coping and is not considered to be as rare or as dysfunctional as was previously believed.

The life and spirituality of Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622), the Savoyard bishop, saint, and Doctor of the Church, resonates well with the concept of human resilience as a healthy path in coping. Several key moments in his life when de Sales grieved the deaths of family members demonstrate aspects of such equilibrium. In particular, Francis’s understanding of divine providence supports resilient behavior as demonstrated in his own experience, and in the spirituality which he espoused through his writings, particularly his letters of spiritual direction. As this chapter aims to highlight, the practical and optimistic spirituality of St. Francis de Sales supports human resilience, a positive and healthy response to loss and grief.

**Human Resilience**

Following from the idea that grief is “work,” an idea first suggested by Sigmund Freud (1917), the stage theory of recovery from grief has become quite prevalent in American culture. The concept originated with the book *On Death and Dying* by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) in which the author presents five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. In this book, these stages of grief were drawn from Kübler-Ross’s observations of terminal patients facing their own death. While it was not her original intention to appropriate such a stage theory to mourners, Kübler-Ross’s five-stage model of grief took root in the American conscience. “Stage theories of grief have become popular and embedded in curricula, textbooks, popular entertainment, and media because they offer predictability and a sense of manageability of the powerful emotions associated with bereavement and loss” (Genevra, 2003).

Other models of grief based on a progression through stages toward recovery include sometimes six, seven, or even ten phases in the process (see Konigsberg 2011, 68-70). For example, psychologist Therese Rando (1993) suggests the “six Rs” of recovery: (1) recognize the death; (2) react (emotionally); (3) recollect and reexperience; (4) relinquish; (5) readjust; and (6) reinvest. The idea that grief is not only work, but requires a mourner to complete a series of stages or tasks, has become a common belief among both counseling professionals and laypeople. However, such a process suggesting a roadmap to recovery has fallen under wide skepticism from researchers such as George A. Bonanno. “The major problem with these ideas is that they tend to create rigid parameters for ‘proper’ behavior that do not match what most people go through” (2009, 22). While Bonanno acknowledges that grief work may still be needed by some people, “those actively struggling with the most severe levels of grief and distress,” the psychologist notes that resilience has often been “ignored and underestimated” (2004, 21-22).

As an alternative to the concept of recovering from loss through “grief work,” Bonanno’s research demonstrates that the human person has the ability to be resilient, and that this is
more common than previously thought. Human resilience is defined to be the ability “to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning” soon after the experience of a highly disruptive event. Such equilibrium has often been either completely unnoticed or mislabeled as absent grief, “the absence of prolonged distress or depression following the death of an important friend or relative.” Since the lack of observable grief has often been viewed as “rare and pathological,” resulting from “denial or avoidance of the emotional realities of the loss,” a resilient person is often misunderstood as being cold and distant with only a superficial attachment to the deceased. Yet, the resilient person exhibits healthy adjustment to loss within a relatively short period of time (2004, 20, 22-23). The recognition of human resilience as the norm rather than the exception in coping led Bonanno and his colleagues to question whether there are predictors of a person’s ability to be resilient. In the end, however, they found that there are no rules about resilient people themselves (Bonanno 2009, 70), nor about the nature of the relationships they had with their lost loved ones (Bonanno et al. 2002; Bonanno, Wortman, and Nesse 2004; Boerner et al. 2005).

In the experience of grief, there is an observable oscillation, or wavelike nature, between positive and negative emotions (Stoebe and Schut 1999). This has supported indeterminacy in how one copes (Bisconti et al. 2004), thus further contributing to the movement away from a predictable stage theory of grief that unfolds in a strict sequence of phases. Based on this back-and-forth process, Bonanno and his research team have found that people who are resilient often demonstrate a flexibility which allows them to both remember positive memories and confront the pain of loss (Bonanno et al. 2002). Therefore, as noted earlier, avoidance is not a coping strategy for resilient people.

Such behavioral flexibility, the “ability to adjust to the shifting demands of different situations,” contributes to one’s ability to maintain the stable equilibrium of human resilience. It has been observed that resilient persons who can react well to the unexpected and stressful events of life (such as tragedy and death) often possess certain qualities more than others. These include three personality characteristics: optimism; self-confidence; and a broad repertoire of behaviors to express one’s emotions (Bonanno 2009, 76-77). The last of these three, what Bonanno’s research group calls “expressive flexibility,” has been shown to lead to more effective coping in the face of grief-filled pain (Bonanno, Papa et al. 2004).

The three aforementioned qualities, especially optimism, are evident in the life of Francis de Sales, both in his personal approach to living and in the spirituality he practiced and shared with those to whom he ministered. As suggested by Bonanno and his colleagues, these characteristics contribute to the saint’s own resilience in bereavement. By way of introducing the bishop-saint to this discussion, we recount his resilience in response to the death of his father Monsieur de Boisy in 1601. At the beginning of that year, the patriarch fell ill and called his first-born son and the rest of the family to his bedside at their family home, the Château de Sales at Thorens in Savoy. At the time, Francis was coadjutor to the bishop of Geneva, but returned home again in February and March to attend to the dying man. Based on the recent improvement of his father’s health, assumed to remain stable until Easter, the young coadjutor kept his commitment to preach the Lenten sermons in Annecy (Lajouanie 1964 [1986] 1:410). However, on April 5, 1601, Monsieur de Boisy died at the family castle; the following day, when Francis received news of his father’s death, he was preparing to ascend the pulpit to preach on the following Gospel text about the death of Jesus’s friend Lazarus: “Lord, he whom you love is ill” (John 11:3).
Despite the sad news, the preacher proceeded as usual, so composed that his listeners did not detect any signs of grief on the part of Francis (Henry-Coianièer [1964] 1973, 124). Only after finishing his sermon did the coadjutor weep before his congregation, informing them of his loss. After spending several days in his family’s village to mourn and bury his father, de Sales returned to Annecy to preach again the following Sunday. While this episode in the saint’s life may appear to show a mix of healthy grieving and stoic denial, his reaction demonstrates a genuine resilience, the foundation for which is best summarized by one of his biographers: “The Provost bowed to God’s will and preached on the benefits of affliction” (Lajeunie [1964] 1986, 1:411, emphasis is mine).

The saint’s belief in divine province and in the will of God at work in daily living influences de Sales’s spirituality, which has been characterized as both practical and optimistic (Danella 2001). His personal spirit shapes and supports his personality traits which are congruent with those found in resilient persons as described above. The way that de Sales understands the concepts of providence and divine will is only one facet of Salesian spirituality in which the love relationship between the human and the divine is the centerpiece. The saint’s resilience is demonstrated at other moments of grief during his life, namely the deaths of his sister in 1607, his mother in 1610, and his brother, his newborn nephew and his sister-in-law during a less than six-month span in 1617. As we shall examine in this chapter, Francis de Sales draws upon his faith in divine providence to grieve in a manner that allows the saint, as well as those to whom he provides spiritual direction, to return to an equilibrium that resonates with a contemporary understanding of human resilience. We first provide a brief summary of key aspects of Salesian spirituality, with a focus on how the saint understands divine providence.

SPIRITUALITY OF FRANCIS DE SALES

The spirituality of St. Francis de Sales, the Savoyard Bishop of Geneva, is given in his ever-popular *The Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609), which encapsulates the universal call to love God and neighbor. The spiritual instruction in this book is directed to anyone who is “obliged to live an ordinary life” ([1609] 1966, 33). His *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616), on the other hand, is “a compendium of the whole spiritual life, both in theory and in practice” (Smith 1967, 41), and is intended for the person advanced in the life of devotion. Throughout his life, and in the midst of his ministry as bishop, reformer, and preacher, de Sales dedicated a considerable amount of his time to spiritual direction, which he most frequently performed through the art of letter-writing.

Christian humanism, a powerful intellectual current emerging from the sixteenth century, “sought to bring literature and art into the service of Christian religion and piety” (Smith 1967, 13) and “places great store in the capacities of humankind in the religious enterprise” (Wright 1996, 158). Considered to be a great Christian humanist, Francis de Sales viewed everything in terms of love, both human and divine. While “the love of God defines human nature” (Buckley 1989, 40) and is the center of one’s life, it is the human capacity of free

---

1 Although Salesian spirituality is considered to be the co-creation of both de Sales and his friend Saint Jane de Chantal (Wright 1996, 158; Wright and Power 1988, 11-3), for the purposes of this chapter, we shall use the term “Salesian spirituality” to refer strictly to that of Saint Francis de Sales.
I Shall always Take the Side of Divine Providence

choice that allows one to respond to that love. Living and loving are integrally connected, and it is God the Lover, not God the Creator, who is the primary image of the divine for de Sales (Pocetto 1960, 46). Love, the image and likeness of the Creator, is the great orderer: “in man all things must be set in order by love and for love” (de Sales [1616] 1963, 1:66). The human person reveals the love of God through one’s own loving, and although the love revealed is really God’s love, we are the ones who choose to express it. For this reason, the commandment to love God and neighbor is paramount for Francis de Sales.

In Salesian spirituality, the relationship of love between God and the human person is described via the image of the heart, “a wholistic and diffuse image that in Salesian use conveys a sense of the central and ultimate dynamic of both the human person and of God.” The hearts of humanity and the heart of God are interconnected so much so in life, both earthly and spiritual. Love which is identified with God and whose source is the divine heart, “the womb of that love,” is both a means and an end -- love draws us deeper into the mystery of the divine, who is love (Wright 1990, 143-4, 146). This process of an “unfolding sacred presence” of heart speaking to heart expresses all aspects of living: beauty and delight, suffering and death. This is most intimately given in the transforming example of the gentle and humble heart of Jesus, a hallmark of Salesian spirituality based on Francis’s favorite verse from the Gospel of St. Matthew (11:29).

Central to the discussion of Francis de Sales’s theology and spirituality is divine providence, “God’s all-wise, all-loving, and all-encompassing guidance of nature, history, and the course of individual lives” (O’Collins and Farrugia 2000, 216). In his Treatise, de Sales devotes several chapters of Book Two to describing divine providence, and how and why this reality of God is evident in the daily events of life. The bishop gives a disclaimer that what we perceive as a variety of actions performed by God are but one single act, which is God’s own divinity; however, the singularity of God’s word produces diversity among things. Because God’s word is permanent and unchanging, “it produces all changes that are good”; and, because it is eternal, “it gives to all things their succession, changes, order, rank, and season.” Employing a printery image, the saint concludes, “God, like the printer, has given existence to all the different creatures which have been, are, and shall be, by one single stroke of his all-powerful will” ([1616] 1963, 1:104-6). What is of importance to note in the above quotation is Francis’s understanding that the single stroke of creation took into account not just a past time and place, but all time: past, present, and future. However, for de Sales, this is not a clockmaker God of deism, who designed and ordered creation, set it in motion, and then stood back and watched (see Barbour 1997, 21, 36-38). Divine providence includes God’s loving care and guidance.

Such providence “reaches all things” according to the saint ([1616] 1963, 1:109). Through providence, God chose to create, decided to unite with the created nature in the person of his Son, and for the Savior’s sake, chose to create all else, including both the fortuitous and the unexpected (Smith 1967, 64-5). However, these events are only deemed as either fortuitous or unexpected by our human standards. Although we may not recognize it, divine providence “foresees them and directs them to the general good of the universe” (de Sales [1616] 1963, 1:109).

Linked to the concept of divine providence is the saint’s understanding of the will of God. God is revealed through the divine will, known in a variety of ways by the human person. De Sales distinguishes between the “two wills of God”: the signified will of God and the will of God’s good pleasure. In concert with the unified action of divine providence
discussed above, the bishop sees only one will of God; however, "he saw God’s essence so transcending human capacity that it could not be known in its simple unity" (Wright and Power 1988, 40).

The signified will of God is revealed to us through words, such as Christian doctrine, and is proposed to us in advance by God to our own free will (Power 1994, 267). This is the will to be done. The person, through "love of conformity," aligns oneself to this revealed will of God. On the other hand, the will of God’s good pleasure is God’s will done and happens independent of human consent (Wright and Power 1988, 42). Whereas the signified will of God is revealed through words, the will of God’s good pleasure is revealed through events. The latter type of will is not discerned until after the event has happened. Francis notes that "love of submission," our response to the will of God’s good pleasure, is most recognized in tribulations. From the hand of God, sufferings and afflictions should also be embraced and loved ([1616] 1963, 2:97, 99-100).

It has been noted by Wendy Wright and Joseph Power that the term "good pleasure" is misleading: "The bishop does not mean to imply that God causes all events and existing realities but that whatever is is in some way within God’s providence; it is not outside of the loving embrace of the creative and redemptive process" (1988, 42 n. 4, 43). In this sense, divine providence is widened to exhibit the creativity of God being unfolded within a "process" whose every occurrence is directed by the hand of God. This is a human-divine process whereby humanity must "live courageously between the one will of God and the other" (de Sales [1616] 1963, 2:116).

As a Christian humanist, Francis takes seriously the human faculty of choosing within this process. He outlines a short method for knowing the signified will of God: "After we have implored the light of the Holy Spirit, applied our thought to search for his good pleasure, taken counsel with our director and perhaps with two or three other spiritual persons, we must come to a resolution and decision in the name of God. After that we must not call our choice in doubt, but devoutly, peacefully, and firmly keep it and sustain it" ([1616] 1963, 2:95). This method exemplifies co-creativity when we are specifically searching for the signified will of God. In Book Nine of his Treatise, Francis illustrates the difficulty humanity faces in living between two wills when he describes the image of the child Jesus walking with Mary ([1616] 1963, 2:131-2). Sometimes we are carried by the events that confront us in life (as Jesus in the arms of the Blessed Mother); and at other times, we walk on our own using our own free will, in conformity with God’s as much as possible (as the child Jesus walked on his own, yet held the hand of his Mother). We live with a free will that allows for choices, yet we also know not of the events of God’s good pleasure before they happen. As in cases of suffering and death, such results should not be imagined as "desired" by God, but understood to be within general providence (Power 1994, 270).

**SALESIAN COPING**

In the fourth part of his Introduction, Francis de Sales focuses on temptations that one confronts in daily living, and he suggests remedies for such temptations. In particular, he discusses sorrow in chapter 12 of this part of the book, and recognizes that it "can be either good or evil according to its different ways of affecting us" ([1609] 1966, 253). While it may
produce good effects like compassion, the evil effects can potentially outweigh the good. In particular, sorrow can produce anxiety, “a source from which and by which many temptations arise” (251). Thus, to avoid sorrow and the anxiety that sadness and grief can produce, Francis recommends prayer which “lifts up the soul to God who is our only joy and consolation.” In such prayer, the saint encourages the use of words and feelings that “tend to confidence in God and to his love” (254). Placing trust in divine providence eases the pain of sorrow.

The spiritual guidance offered by de Sales in his Introduction can noticeably be recognized in his own personal life during the saint’s personal grief over his sister’s death in 1607, just two years before the publication of his spiritual classic which we referenced above. Jeanne de Sales was entrusted in 1605 by her brother and her mother Madame de Boisy to the care of St. Jane de Chantal (1572-1641). The friendship between Jane and Francis blossomed from an initial encounter (1604) of a widow and her future spiritual director to a mutual partnership resulting in the creation of a new religious order of women, the Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary (1610), of which Jane became the founding Mother. Madame de Chantal brought Jeanne de Sales, along with her own children, to her family home in the Bourbilly region during autumn 1607. However, the festive time of the wine harvest in Bourbilly also coincided with a tragic fever epidemic. Jeanne suddenly fell ill and, despite the motherly care and nursing she received from St. Jane, the teenage girl died on October 7, 1607 (Stopp [1962] 2002, 93).

Madame de Chantal’s painful grief over losing the young girl was coupled with her deep sense of responsibility toward Madame de Boisy who entrusted the beloved daughter to her care. Because of this two-fold pain, Jane vowed “before God that the house of Sales should be recompensed for the loss of its daughter through the offer of one of her own daughters to their line” (Wright [1985] 2001, 88). After receiving a letter from Jane that notified him of his sister’s death and his friend’s personal vow, Francis de Sales responded in kind on November 2, 1607. In this communication, the bishop-saint told his friend about his own grief, but also about the manner in which his mother received the sad news about the death of her youngest child: “Not a word of impatience, not a moment’s loss of peace; she blessed God many times and resigned herself to his will. I never saw a more tranquil grief” (de Sales 1960, 141). As a comparison to Madame de Chantal’s reaction, de Sales shares this portrait of his resilient mother filled with sorrow but resigned to accept what the hand of divine providence provides. Yet, Jane’s vow did bear fruit in some sense: after the burial of Jeanne de Sales, Madame de Chantal resolved to ensure that her daughter Marie-Aimée would marry Francis’s brother Bernard de Sales, a wish that Madame de Boisy expressed to Jane when they last visited during the year before Jeanne’s death.

André Ravier, a biographer of Francis de Sales, considers this letter written to Jane in 1607 to be “admirable” because never did the Bishop of Geneva, “in his numerous letters of consolation, reveal himself to be more human or more evangelical” (1988, 163). In this letter, Francis shares his personal belief when he summarizes how he responded to losing his sister: “I shall always take the side of divine providence: it does all things well and disposes everything for the best” (de Sales 1960, 141). We hear echoes of his mother’s disposition in

---

7 Jane’s husband of eight years, Baron Christophe de Chantal, was killed in a hunting accident in 1601, just days after the birth of their daughter Charlotte. During the early years of their friendship, Francis de Sales guided Jane to forgive Monsieur d’Anetey whose misfire killed her husband (Wright [1985] 2001, 70-71).
this quotation. The saint proceeds by urging his friend to accept the will of God "in everything and in every way, without an if, without a but, without any exception, without reserves" (142). In so doing, Francis does not deny the feelings of grief experienced in the aftermath of death and loss. While he recognizes that we are "human and no more," de Sales also acknowledges the existence of an interior peace and confidence that is possible in the face of tremendous pain. This grief is human, but there is something more than this passion inside the human person. Salesian scholar Joseph Power explains this Salesian perspective: "when grief (or any other passion) invades the soul and seems to totally inundate it, there is still part of us which can cling to God" (1993, 5).

In Part 4, chapter 11 of his Introduction, Francis de Sales states simply that we feel sadness when we experience something contrary to our will. The spiritual writer describes both a remedy and a potential danger to prolonging sadness:

If it is out of love for God that the soul seeks escape from its troubles, it will do so patiently, meekly, humbly, and calmly and look for deliverance rather by God’s providence than its own efforts, industry, or diligence. If it seeks deliverance because of self-love then, as if success depended on itself rather than on God, it will excite and wear itself out in its search for means of escape. ... Now if it does not immediately succeed in the way it wants, it grows very anxious and impatient. Instead of removing the evil, it increases it and this involves the soul in great anguish and distress together with such loss of strength and courage that it imagines the evil to be incurable. You see, then, that sadness, which is justified in the beginning, produces anxiety, and anxiety in turn produces increase of sadness. All this is extremely dangerous ([1609] 1966, 251).

In this passage, de Sales’s wisdom of human nature resonates with the grief theory we discussed earlier, particularly the characteristics that correlate with resilience. The saint recognizes that if we do not rely on divine providence, but solely on our own will, the sadness of grief will increase, producing anxiety which in turn leads back to sadness, and so a constant loop repeats. This could lead to chronic grief, whereby "the pain of loss simply overwhels" and it is "all but impossible to return to... [one’s] normal daily routine" (Bonanno 2009, 6).

Hence, prayer and trust in God’s will have the potential to break the loop of anxiety and sadness. This, in turn, can lead to flexible behavior: the grief may subside momentarily, yet oscillation will continue. Through his practical and optimistic spirituality, de Sales offers a path to being resilient in the bereavement experience. We saw earlier that de Sales speaks of a balance between living between the signified divine will and the will of God’s good pleasure. Likewise, there is equilibrium in embracing the naturally human passion of grief and, at the same time, being confident in the loving care and guidance of God. While straddling these two realities, a person acknowledges the mystery of the divine bolstered by a hope-filled optimism that the pain of loss will not eliminate the joy of living. Throughout his discussion, de Sales’s characteristic gentleness is consistently evident in his approach to removing the evil that results from sorrow: "put your mind at rest and in peace... Then try gently and meekly to accomplish your desire [to escape evil]... without hurry, trouble, or anxiety. Otherwise... you... cause yourself all the more trouble" (de Sales [1609] 1966, 252).

On March 1, 1610, Francis’s mother Madame de Boisy died at Thorens. While the bishop was at her bedside, he learned of the death of Jane de Chantal’s youngest daughter, Charlotte,
who was just nine years old. Ten days after his mother’s death, de Sales begins a letter addressed to his good friend about his double sadness:

My very dear daughter, must we not everywhere and in all things adore this supreme providence? For its counsels are holy, good and most lovable. ... All his [= God’s] ways are just and all his decrees are righteous, his good pleasure is always holy and his ordinances very gracious” (1960, 179).

Again, the saint is clear and consistent: to be resilient, rely on the goodness of God’s providence, even if it does not seem “good” from a human perspective.

One final episode that demonstrates Francis de Sales’s resilient behavior rooted in his faith in divine providence is the triple bereavement encountered by the combined families of de Chantal and de Sales in 1617. Recall the personal vow prayed by Jane in the wake of Jeanne de Sales’s death in 1607; this promise was fulfilled, with the assistance of Francis, when she arranged the betrothal of her daughter Marie-Aimée to Bernard de Sales, who married on October 13, 1609. A colonel in the Duke of Savoy’s army, Bernard died of a fever on May 23, 1617, while away at war in Piedmont. It is reported that, upon receiving news of his brother’s death, Francis beat his thigh “and wept bitterly, but soon, raising his eyes and hands to heaven, he quietly spoke these words ‘Yes, Father, thy will be done’” (Henry-Couënnier [1964] 1973, 321). Again, we see an expressive flexibility in Francis’s behavior – from grief (and anger) to confidence in divine providence. On May 29, 1617, the bishop wrote to Mother de Bréchard, the religious superior of the Visitation monastery in Moulins: “…here he [Bernard] is taken away! But God is good, and he does all things in his goodness” (Ravier 1988, 215). At the time of her husband’s death, Marie-Aimée de Sales was pregnant; and, in early September, her son was born prematurely and died. The infant’s mother died two days later on September 6, 1617. Unwavering in his deep trust in divine providence, Francis de Sales said of this third loss: “we embrace, love, and adore the will of God with a total submission of our hearts” (ibid.).

In addition to the personality characteristics which correlate with resilience as offered by Bonanno and discussed earlier in this chapter, people who cope well also have “a broad network of friends and relatives on whom they can rely, both for emotional support and for helping with the details and demands of daily life” (2009, 75). This facet of successful coping is present both in the life of Francis de Sales and his teachings. It should be noted that Francis and Jane exchanged many letters of spiritual direction and friendship between the years 1604 and 1622 (although more of Francis’s have survived), exemplifying the advice given by de Sales in his Introduction: “share your heart’s grief with others” whether it be a spiritual director or “at least to some faithful and devout friend” ([1609] 1966, 253). We have seen Francis’s side of the letter-writing dialogue between these friends in moments of grief. In fact, these exchanges exemplify just one aspect of their unique and spiritual friendship, one which Francis would call a “true friendship.”

In the Salesian sense, a true friendship between persons in this life mirrors the human-divine love relationship which will endure eternally: “How good it is to love here on earth as they love in heaven and to learn to cherish one another in this world as we shall do eternally in the next!” (de Sales [1609] 1966, 175). In a similar manner of reflection, the way true

---

3 In the Salesian tradition, a true friendship is defined to be a mutual love that is reciprocally recognized by the friends and communicates virtuous things (de Sales [1609] 1966, 169, 174; Wisniewski 2012, 96-100).
Earthly friends rely on each other during times of grief is like the human person's reliance on the providence of the Divine Friend. Because it is such an important aspect of the devout life, Francis de Sales discusses the topic of true friendship at length in chapters 17 through 22 in the third part of his *Introduction*.

Strong and pure, true friendship is eternal, resembling God's friendship of love with humanity (Wisniewski 2012, 96). In his letters of spiritual direction, de Sales used the eternal quality of human friendship to console those who mourn. For example, in a letter from 1603 to an aunt who recently became a widow, Francis wrote that “in heaven, we shall fulfill and perfect eternally the good and Christian friendships we have only begun in this world” (1892-1964, 12:178; the translation is mine). Again, in 1617, to a woman whose husband recently died, he wrote, “the friendships and fellowships begun in this world will be taken up again never to be broken off” (1995, 130). This idea of “continuing bonds” between a mourner and the deceased loved one has gained some traction among researchers (see, for example, Klass et al. 1996), yet Bonanno notes that there are “moderating factors” yet to be studied with regard to just how beneficial such continuing bonds are to successful grieving, particularly to resilient behavior (2009, 140-141).

**Conclusion**

Unlike a grief theory such as Kübler-Ross's five stages of loss, which requires the bereaved to work through phases in a process toward recovery, human resilience in the face of loss has been recognized. Research psychologists, such as George Bonanno, have found that the resilient capacity to maintain equilibrium is more common than previously assumed. A healthy adjustment to loss often occurs with persons who exhibit behavioral flexibility, maintaining the ability to both engage the pain of grief and evoke happy memories about the deceased loved one. Additionally, resilient people are found to be optimistic and confident, trusting that “things will work out” and believing they are strong enough to “pull through.” Finally, resilience is commonly observed during bereavement when the mourner maintains a close support network upon whom he/she can rely in difficult moments.

The practical spirituality of Francis de Sales resonates well with the concept of human resilience during the aftermath of a loved one’s death. The Christian humanist sees the journey of life as a “dress rehearsal” (Stopp [1995] 1997, 123) for the ultimate divine-human relationship of love fulfilled in a heavenly union. For the bishop-saint, not only do the true friendships he promotes reflect this ultimate bond, but they also provide support in trying times, such as those experienced during mourning. This type of connection to others fuels an optimistic hope in the goodness of divine providence. Francis's friendship with Jane de Chantal models mutual support to trust in the divine will – especially that of God's good pleasure. Relying on the Divine Friend, painful grief can be surpassed and stability in daily living is possible. Such deep faith in providence sustained de Sales’s resilience when he lost close family members including his father, sister, mother and brother. His consistent reliance on God’s loving care and guidance is evident in how he responded to these deaths as documented in his letters to Jane, among others. The saint’s instructions in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, a “handbook” for virtuous and holy living, echo his personal actions and spiritual life which are rooted in the surety of divine love.
Without avoiding the passion of grief, Francis de Sales mourns with human emotions coupled with an inner sense of equanimity gained from the assurance of God’s ever-present shoulder of support. For this reason, Salesian spirituality provides a tool to supplement and enhance the human capacity for resilience in coping.

REFERENCES


