

Salesian Christian Humanism



Francis de Sales and Antoine Favre leading the Florimontane Academy

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SALESIAN CENTER FOR FAITH & CULTURE

www.desales.edu/salesian

CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

Interest in the human person and the positive affirmation of human life and culture which stems from faith is the hallmark of any humanism qualified as “**Christian.**” Several salient features distinguish its world view, including:

- an understanding of human nature as dependent on one’s relation to God
- an acknowledgment of human sinfulness and faith in the power of forgiveness
- an emphasis on human freedom as ordered to ultimate beauty, truth, and goodness
- an emphasis on human responsibility over and against forms of determinism
- a vision of the individual as rooted in communion with God and others through the Church
- a vision of the universe as ordered by divine providence and oriented toward salvation
- a conviction that human history as a purpose for which Jesus Christ is the key

The ongoing promotion of Christian humanism seeks to provide a necessary corrective to other forms of humanism that can threaten human life in the twenty-first century, including:

- a *scientific* humanism that proclaims itself capable of explaining the human mind, human qualities, and religious faith itself, entirely by means of physical laws
- a *technological* humanism that locates meaningfulness in human capabilities alone, and fulfillment in material objects of human production
- a *secular* humanism that seeks the full meaning of human existence within the boundaries of this age and this world itself
- an *ethical* humanism that values responding to human need but rejects religion as failing to foster independence and courage

SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

Among other traditional forms, **Salesian** Christian Humanism revels in the glory revealed by God, who guides history along its path toward the perfection of love and who inserts into that history the human being created in the divine image and likeness, whose fullness is the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Central to the spirituality of St. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) is his vision of



*Man (is) the perfection of the universe,
mind the perfection of man,
love the perfection of the mind,
and charity (love of God) the perfection of love.*

Embodied also by saints JANE DE CHANTAL (1572-1641), MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE (1647-1690), and LEONIE DE SALES AVIAT (1844-1914), this vision of life and love is the foundation of a spiritual tradition that foreshadowed the “universal call to holiness” of the Second Vatican Council and that lives on in such classic religious literature as the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*.

At its core, the tradition of Salesian Christian Humanism embraces an understanding of human life as guided always and everywhere by love, imbued with an imperturbable optimism, lived with humility and gentleness, and expressed in words of inspired common sense. It promotes a practical holiness continually attuned to the presence of God, particularly as this is manifested in prayer, in the teachings of Scripture and Tradition, in the duties of one’s vocation or state-in-life, and in the present moment of each and every day.

THE MISSION OF DESALES UNIVERSITY

The heritage that is Salesian Christian Humanism now informs the educational philosophy of DeSales University. Born four centuries ago, this spiritual tradition is adapted to our contemporary situation and applied to the world of higher education by focusing on a properly religious vision of the world, of the human persons who inhabit it, and of the God who created and redeems it.



As our university president (Fr. Bernie O’Connor, OSFS) noted in his inaugural address:

In my view, as the new millennium develops, there will be two types of universities: the religious and the secular. The religious ones will present the greatest challenges to the culture. They will require society to respect the human person above all else. They will force serious thought about the origin and ultimate destiny of the human species. They will insist upon thoughtful attention to the tough decisions. They will not acquiesce in pragmatic compromise. They will accept the mysteries of evil and suffering and try to fashion appropriate human responses. They will demand the greatest reach by their students. They will strive for beauty, truth, and goodness. They will worship an absolute. They will insist upon this marriage between faith and reason. I pledge to you that Allentown College of Saint Francis de Sales [now DeSales University] will clearly and firmly lead the way to this type of religious university.

At DeSales University, this marriage between faith and reason finds a home with many rooms. Here a student will find an academic program in which the general education core requires study of great works in the humanities, of various modes of thinking in other disciplines, and of the Christian values embraced in philosophy and theology. Here a student will learn from faculty who combine professional competence in their disciplines with personal commitment to the faith. Here a student will interact with other students in a residence life whose policies reflect Catholic morality and in groups and organizations that promote both spiritual development and community service. And here a student has the opportunity to participate in institutionally sponsored activities that display to the larger public a commitment to the ideals of Catholic higher education.

In this way, the educational experience that unites faith and reason at DeSales University seeks to prepare students not simply for careers but for life itself.

In the Natural Sciences they learn not only the biological and chemical make-up of organisms, but also the respect for that created dignity which makes life human.

In Nursing & Health they learn not only how to diagnose and treat disease, but also how to develop those spiritual goods without which human wellness is incomplete.

In the Social Sciences they learn not only the principles of interaction and organization, but also the virtue of charity that enlivens truly human relationships.

In the Humanities they learn not only to interpret language and literature, but also to see that Truth which gives fullness of meaning to all human communication.

In Business they learn not only the principles of a market economy, but also the fundamentals of ethical behavior by which to live a worthy life.

In Education they learn not only techniques for imparting knowledge to the mind, but also the value of forming the heart and soul of the whole person.

In Math & Computer Science they learn not only calculations and computations, but also that formula of faith which provides personal order to life.

In the Performing & Fine Arts they learn not only acting and directing, but also appreciating the divine Beauty inherent in human life and the world that is its stage.

In Philosophy & Theology they learn not only the laws of logic and the truths of revelation, but also the One who unites the many and brings salvation to all.

Thus does DeSales University seek to bring the influence of Salesian Christian Humanism into all fields of contemporary culture. Today, this mission is further supported by a unique and special endeavor.

The Salesian Center for Faith & Culture

St. Francis de Sales regularly championed the importance of learning and its connection to good living, even to the point of imploring his priests with the notion that “knowledge is the eighth sacrament for the hierarchy of the Church” (*Oeuvres*, XXIII:303-305). But besides the learned works from his pen, the greatest achievement of St. Francis de Sales in the world of education may well be a short-lived one ... the Florimontane Academy (1607-1610), which he founded together with his life-long friend, Antoine Favre (first president of Geneva). Established in Annecy (France), its name signals its aim of gathering together the flowers of literature and the fruits of science. Taking as a motto the biblical notion that “all things will come to the one who does his best,” this academy of scholars had for its purpose “the exercise of all virtues, the sovereign glory of God, the service of the most serene Princes, and public usefulness.” It served “all the gallant masters of the honorable arts ... including painters, sculptors, carpenters, architects, and the like.” For this audience, the members sought to provide an encyclopedic range of learning, including lessons in politics, philosophy, mathematics, science, and the aesthetic of language, especially French. Its distinctiveness among similar educational entities of the time resulted from the fact that the Florimontane Academy endeavored to embrace and disseminate that devout humanism characteristic of Salesian spirituality; its expressed intention was that “All the members of the Academy will maintain a mutual and fraternal love” (*Oeuvres*, XXIV:242-247).



The Florimontane Academy offers a worthwhile conceptual model for the establishment of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University. As the former issued from the friendship and zeal for learning of its founders, so the latter has come into existence in the collaborative tradition of Salesian spirituality as lived and disseminated by the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales throughout the history of DeSales University. As the purpose of the Florimontane Academy was to combat heresy through the promotion of devout humanism, so the Salesian Center engages modern secular culture in a dialogue with faith. And as the development of the Florimontane Academy owed its success to the infusion of gospel values in all spheres of learning, so the Salesian Center mediates the advancement of culture by bringing the charism of Salesian Christian Humanism to bear upon all disciplines of knowledge and education.

The Salesian Center for Faith & Culture exists to provide academic research and educational development at DeSales University. Its specific purpose is twofold: (1) to investigate, by interdisciplinary means, matters of urgency or importance having to do with the interplay between faith and culture and (2) to disseminate that knowledge through a variety of ways so as to facilitate the public engagement of faith with the various domains in which the university operates (intellectual, social, and ecclesial). Through the work of this center, DeSales University is situated as the unique place in the world in which the rich heritage of Salesian Christian Humanism can be studied and brought to life.
