

Topic 18: Salesian Spirituality, Part 2

Overview: St. Francis de Sales envisioned God as Mother. He was not the first to have this insight, but such a notion was more the exception than the rule. The maternal understanding of God filters into the writings of Francis and Jane. Francis is often referred to as “the gentle saint” due to his mindset and his emphasis on relationships. Love begets love. Francis would propose that the love we receive from God spills over in the love that we give to others. Francis’ vision was shared by Jane Frances de Chantal. Salesian spirituality takes all of the currents in spirituality that preceded it and stamps it with love. It was and is a spirituality to be lived in the context of the world, one that embraces the ordinariness of everyday life.

Jane and the Visitation Nuns

- Jane approached her duties with a maternal energy. She was compassionate in her guidance of her spiritual daughters. Her nuns were brought to spiritual maturity not through fear or servile duty but through love.
- In her St. Basil’s Day colloquy, she describes the process of the spiritual life and birth into love of God as martyrdom. She builds on the spirituality of martyrdom and the Cross in a gentle and loving way.
- At the foundation of Jane’s spiritual growth was the Salesian belief that to be fully human is to become the lover of God one is meant to be. Under Francis’s guidance, she learned to live her life with gentle patience. Jane Frances de Chantal models the Salesian vision of the stripping of self.
- With Francis, Jane founded the first Visitation convent in 1610. By the time of her death, eighty monasteries had been established.
- Jane lived in a time of transition from the medieval to the modern world, in the midst of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.
- Jane and Francis undertook the spiritual revitalization of their society through the devout life.

Highlights of Salesian Spirituality

- There was a movement towards secularization during Francis and Jane’s lifetimes. They both recognized that the remedy was not to judge but to call people into a relationship with God. Francis passed around leaflets inviting others into the spiritual life.
- In a sense, they were disciples of the humanism of the Renaissance. A Christian Humanism lies at the base of Salesian optimism.
- The road to sanctity is invitational.

- The spiritual life is an ascent. Both Jane and Francis emphasize the notion of accepting people wherever they are on their spiritual journey.
- Three words come up frequently in the writings of Francis.
 - 1) Inclination: the human spirit is inclined towards God.
 - 2) Appetite: we have an appetite for God.
 - 3) Desire: Francis invites people to get in touch with our deepest desires.
- Francis and Jane emphasize the importance of joy: “Strive to overcome all melancholy feelings and all sadness. Try to live in peace . . . The Israelites were never able to sing in Babylon because they kept thinking of their homeland, but I want us to sing everywhere.”
- He disliked gloomy spirituality. Salesian spirituality leads to love, gentleness, and joy.

Review Questions

1. St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane Frances de Chantal transcended their culture and taught a spirituality that was rooted in the scriptures. What are some of the things about our culture that we need to reject in order to root our spirituality in the scriptures and the way Jesus invites us to live?
2. Joy is an important fruit of Salesian spirituality. In fact, joy is a fruit of the spirit that we can use to judge the authenticity of any particular spirituality. Where is the joy in your life? If it is not there, why and what can you do to rekindle a spirit of joy?
3. One of the things that balances Francis and Jane was the dynamic between the masculine and feminine in their relationship. In no small way, this helped Francis to see God as Mother in his writings. Reflect on the relationships in your life. In what way are they help or a hindrance for your spiritual journey?