

## 8. Francis de Sales

Francis de Sales exemplifies the manner in which 17th-century France dominated the profound renaissance of spirituality and mysticism that accompanied the reforms throughout the Catholic Church during this period of the counter-reformation. Mystic, saint, doctor of the Church, "Devout humanist," and "the master and restorer of sacred eloquence," de Sales is "the heavenly patron of all writers," and one who contributed much to the development of the modern French language. It surprised me years ago when I wrote an anthology of Christian mysticism that the one on Francis de Sales was the longest.

**1. Introduction:** The second mark of a true ecstasy is the ecstasy of work and life, a life elevated and united to God by denial of worldly lusts and mortification of [one 's] natural will and inclinations through interior gentleness, simplicity, and humility, and above all through constant charity. - Francis de Sales in Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 269.

Francis de Sales: Example of 17th-century French dominance in mysticism. Mystic, saint, Doctor of the Church, "devout humanist," and "the heavenly patron of all writers."

**Brief Biography:** When only four years of age, Francis uttered prophetically: "God's and my mother's love I hold most dearly." Educated to become a Renaissance gentleman. Conversion due to the Ignatian Exercises. However, Francis believed that he was doomed to hell. Healed through prayer before a statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance. Despite inner conflict with predestination issues, he still resolved to live in "disinterested love" for God.

During prayer, he heard the words stamped onto his soul with joyful love of God: "I do not call myself the damning one; my name [Jesus] is the one who saves." 6. Ordained priest in 1593 and displayed a counter-reformer's missionary ardor. Enduring many hardships, Francis reconverted the Chablis area. His books, *Controversies* and *The Standard of the Cross* date from this period.

**II. His Mysticism:** In 1602, he became bishop of Geneva. Main emphases: Francis insisted that God desires the salvation of everyone and predestines no one to hell. The "correspondence" between God - the source of love - and the free human person, is created out of and for love. His famous motto, "Live Jesus! Live, Jesus."

**Introduction to the Devout Life:** A classic that in a systematic way explains the purgative, illuminative, and unitive aspects of the mystical life. Affective love of

God that flows into effective love of neighbor. Mortification of one's entire self; keeping Christ before one's eyes. Contrast with more militant spiritualities of the Counter-Reformation. When the spiritual journey becomes difficult, sing with Francis of Assisi, "all pains grow sweet, all labors light. Live, Jesus!"

**III. Major Work:** His masterpiece, *Treatise on the Love of God*: This work is the fruit of spiritual friendship with Jeanne de Chantal. Francis taught that God acts in ordinary human relationships and that spiritual friendship is necessary for a full Christian life. Emphasizes affective and effective love. Stresses that knowledge is required for love.

True contemplation does not demand abandoning images and concepts. Emphasizes human passivity in relationship to God's action in the depths of the soul, nonetheless urges his reader to be a "mystical bee." Meditation as the "mystical rumination" needed to inflame the will to holy affections and to discover reasons for love. Meditation gives birth to contemplation. Contemplation: a simple loving attention of the mind to "the things of God." Because the conversation between God is "heart to heart" and "altogether secret," it is called "mystical." The contemplative is like someone smelling the united aromas coming from water containing a perfume that is made up of a great variety of flowers.

In contemplation, God often acts like a skilled bee keeper, who uses aromatic herbs, honeyed wine, and pleasant sounds to change the course of his wayward bees. The soul often acts like a hungry child who eventually falls asleep at its mother's breast but still continues to suckle in an almost imperceptible way. Prayer of quiet. Images to depict the soul's union with God: ivy grasping and penetrating the bark of a tree; a nursing infant at its mother's breast; honeybees attracted to sound and smell, "imperial water" infusing one's entire body as soon as it is drunk; and precious ointment permeating a ball of cotton.

Francis criticized indirectly the exaggerated role of interior passivity in contemplation taught by those of the spirituality and mysticism of his day. Against this so-called "quietism," he stressed the different ways in which the person must cooperate with and consent to God's grace. Union occurs sometimes without the contemplative offering any resistance; at other times, God causes this union by drawing the will alone or all the soul's faculties. A type of union that he compares to the way a large, heavy mass will press deeper and deeper into the soil because of the force of gravity.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Francis is known as the teacher of "holy indifference" to all except God's will. Central to Francis' vision is that "God's will is God's love." His view of "holy indifference" contrasts the belief of his day that only someone who has absolutely no concern for his or her salvation can be said to have "pure love."

The highest type of union with God: "inhesion" or "adhesion." 1. Brief adhesion is called "transport"; prolonged, "rapture." Francis warned that we must beware of ecstasies more beautiful than good, more bright than warm, more speculative than affective. Raptures that do not result in interior and exterior gentleness, humility, constant charity, and the conquest of worldly lusts and self-will are "extremely doubtful and dangerous."

The most sacred ecstasy: the "ecstasy of work and life." Complete fulfillment of God's commandments and to hold opprobrium, contempt, insults, abjection, persecution, and martyrdom to be joys and blessings, to keep oneself within the limits of most absolute chastity, and finally to live in the world and in this mortal life contrary to all the opinions and maxims of the world.

#### **Reflection Questions**

1. Is Francis' emphasis on ordinary human relationships and spiritual friendships as a necessary part of Christian life surprising coming from a mystic?
2. Francis de Sales emphasizes the necessity of knowledge and does not embrace the apophatic "forgetting" of ideas and images we have seen in other mystics. Does this resonate with you? Why or why not?