

24/1/24

St Francis De Sales

Born in France in 1567, St Francis de sales was reported to be a patient man. He knew for thirteen years that he had a vocation to the priesthood before he mentioned it to his family. When his father said that he wanted Francis to be a soldier and sent him to Paris to study, Francis said nothing. Then when he went to Padua to get a doctorate in law, he still kept quiet, but he studied theology and practiced mental prayer while getting into swordfights and going to parties. Even when his bishop told him if he wanted to be a priest that he thought that he would have a miter waiting for him someday, Francis uttered not a word. Why did Francis wait so long? Throughout his life he waited for God's will to be clear. He never wanted to push his wishes on God, to force the issue. Instead Francis waited, watching and praying until one day God finally made God's will clear to Francis while he was riding his horse. Francis fell from his horse three times. Every time he fell the sword came out of the scabbard. Every time it came out the sword and scabbard came to rest on the ground in the shape of the cross. Francis took the sign and proceeded towards his vocation.

During the time of the Protestant reformation and just over the mountains from where Francis lived was Switzerland and at the time this was Calvinist territory. Francis decided that he should lead an expedition to convert the 60,000 Calvinists back to Catholicism. But by the time he left his expedition consisted of himself and his cousin. For three years, Francis and his cousin trudged through the countryside, had doors slammed in thier face and rocks thrown at them. They slept in haylofts and once slept in a tree to avoid wolves. Francis tied himself to a branch to keep from falling out and was so frozen the next morning he had to be cut down. And after three years, his cousin had left him alone and he had not made one convert.

Francis' unusual patience kept him working. No one would listen to him, no one would even open their door. So Francis found a way to get under the door. He wrote out his sermons, copied them by hand, and slipped them under the doors. This is the first record we have of religious tracts being used to communicate with people and what earned Francis the title of patron saint of journalists.

In Dijon during the year 1604 Francis saw a widow listening closely to his sermon -- a woman he had seen believed that he had seen in a dream. Jane de Chantal was a person on her own, as Francis was, but it was only

when they became friends that they began to become saints. Jane wanted him to take over her spiritual direction, but, not surprisingly, Francis wanted to wait. "I had to know fully what God himself wanted. I had to be sure that everything in this should be done as though his hand had done it." Jane was on a path to mystical union with God and, in directing her, Francis was compelled to follow her and become a mystic himself.

Three years after working with Jane, he finally made up his mind to form a new religious order. But where would they get a convent for their contemplative Visitation nuns? A man came to Francis without knowing of his plans and told him he was thinking of donating a place for use by pious women. In his typical way of not pushing God, Francis said nothing. When the man brought it up again, Francis still kept quiet, telling Jane, "God will be with us if he approves." Finally the man offered Francis the convent.

At that time, the way of holiness was only for monks and nuns -- not for ordinary people. Francis changed all that by giving spiritual direction to lay people living ordinary lives in the world. But he had proven with his own life that people could grow in holiness while involved in a very active occupation. Why couldn't others do the same? His most famous book, *INTRODUCTION TO THE DEVOUT LIFE*, was written for these ordinary people in 1608. Written originally as letters, it became an instant success all over Europe -- though some preachers tore it up because he tolerated dancing and jokes!

For Francis, the love of God was like romantic love. He said, and I quote, "The thoughts of those moved by natural human love are almost completely fastened on the beloved, their hearts are filled with passion for it, and their mouths full of its praises. When it is gone they express their feelings in letters, and can't pass by a tree without carving the name of their beloved in its bark. Thus too those who love God can never stop thinking about him, longing for him, aspiring to him, and speaking about him. If they could, they would engrave the name of Jesus on the hearts of all humankind."

The key to love of God was prayer. "By turning your eyes on God in meditation, your whole soul will be filled with God. Begin all your prayers in the presence of God."

For busy people of the world, Francis advised "Retire at various times into the solitude of your own heart, even while outwardly engaged in discussions or transactions with others and talk to God."

For Francis the test of prayer was a person's actions: "To be an angel in prayer and a beast in one's relations with people is to go lame on both legs."

He believed the worst sin was to judge someone or to gossip about them. Even if we say we do it out of love we're still doing it to look better ourselves. But we should be as gentle and forgiving with ourselves as we should be with others.

As Francis became older and more ill he said, "I have to drive myself but the more I try the slower I go." He wanted to be a hermit but he was more in demand than ever. Eventually, Francis died on December 28, 1622, after giving a nun his last word of advice: "Humility."

Today as the church remembers and gives thanks for Francis de sales, then so do we remember a busy man who led a busy life, and whose success and potency as a preacher and spiritual leader led him into being ever more and more full of busy. Francis was a very different saint who lived a very different life to Antony who we remembered last week. Like Antony and so many others, contemplation was central to Francis's devotion. However, for Francis, the contemplative life of faith was lived out in the duties of state and in the communities God had called Francis to serve. At the heart of Francis's spirituality was this simple premise; "bloom where you are planted."

The testimony of the Saints is as varied as there are people. Some were called out of their communities and led into the wilderness. Others were called into their communities and led into a life service, teaching and direction. Whatever the vocation, Gods call to the holy men and woman of the past is the same call to each one of us here today; to bloom where God has planted us.

Phil Smith