

24. January 2020

"Spiritual Advice"

St. Francis de Sales

Ps 37,3-4.5-6.30-31

Put your trust in Yahweh and do right, make your home in the land and live secure. Make Yahweh your joy and he will give you your heart's desires. Commit your destiny to Yahweh, be confident in him, and he will act, making your uprightness clear as daylight, and the justice of your cause as the noon. Wisdom comes from the lips of the upright, and his tongue speaks what is right; the law of his God is in his heart, his foot will never slip.

Today we celebrate the memory of St. Francis de Sales. He lived between 1567 and 1622; held the office of bishop, became the founder of a religious order and left us as a legacy valuable writings of spirituality, which bear witness to his deep interior life. The best known are the *"Filotea"* - or *"Introduction to the Devout Life"* - and the *"Treatise on the Love of God"*. St. Francis de Sales is considered the "saint of kindness", after he struggled all his life to appease his angry nature. He was a good guide of souls and among his spiritual daughters St. Joan of Chantal stands out.

But his teaching is not only addressed to consecrated people; it also offers help for the path of sanctification of those who live in the world. Above all, the *"Filotea"* is enormously valuable in this sense, and can still be read today by anyone who wants to deepen his spiritual path.

Let us listen to something of what this saint tells us, and let us try to enrich ourselves with his wisdom:

"My past no longer worries me; it belongs to the Divine Mercy. My future does not worry me yet; it belongs to Divine Providence. What worries me and demands from me is today, which belongs to the grace of God and the surrender of my heart, of my good will".

Let's start with the first part of this sentence:

"My past no longer worries me; it belongs to the Divine Mercy."

St. Paul too -whose conversion we will celebrate tomorrow- exhorts us to forget what lies behind and to strain forward to what lies ahead (*cf. Phil 3,13*). It is not simply a matter of forgetting, much less of repressing the uncomfortable things of the past; things that have to do with guilt and failure. No, it is not that... Rather, it is that all that past has already been placed in God's mercy, and is therefore in His hands.

If, for example, forgiveness of sins has already been received in confession, with the corresponding repentance, then God invites us to look ahead. He no longer blames us for our sins, nor does He continue to hold them against us. The remembrance of our own guilt can help us to have mercy on others, to remind us again and again of God's forgiving love and to be vigilant on our way forward.

Thus we can even profit from a sinful past; but it should never afflict us with sorrow; nor should we bring it back by constantly reproaching ourselves for our faults, for then we would be releasing them from the sea of God's mercy, and, at worst, we would be putting them under the dominion of the Accuser. This point we must take to heart, because it is the Accuser who wants to use such situations from the past to torment people. And this counts for both oneself and others. If someone has converted and God has forgiven him his guilt, we have to give him the chance to start over, and not bind him to his past with our accusations.

St. Francis' phrase goes on like this:

"My future does not worry me yet; it belongs to Divine Providence."

This point refers to the worries about the future that so often and unnecessarily occupy our thoughts, making us forget the spiritual reality that God holds the future in His hands. This should not only be a pious wish, but a vivid reality. For this, it is necessary that we educate ourselves interiorly and that, through prayer, we put brakes on the spirit of worry. With these words, certainly St. Francis does not refer to the things that are in our responsibility to shape the future; but to those other things that we unnecessarily occupy ourselves with, when they are not even in our hands, and yet our thoughts revolve around them... Here a basic act of trust in God is asked, and every time that unnecessary worries reappear, we must update this decision. We can ask ourselves whether, deep down, we perhaps do not want to let go of it altogether, because worries have become part of our life, to the point that they seem to correspond to our identity.

And again St. Francis:

"What worries me and demands from me is today, which belongs to the grace of God and the surrender of my heart, of my good will."

With these last words, the saint touches the decisive point. We have to live TODAY! This is how we shape the future! Also the present is impregnated by God's grace; but this is where we can be His collaborators. Our surrender to God allows His grace to rule every moment of our life. This will give us serenity and great trust.

It will be a serenity that comes from the certainty of living in God's grace, combined with the attentiveness to take his guidance and to respond accordingly... It is this that makes us live attentively and focused on the only thing that is necessary: to seek God first and foremost and live in Him.

Thus, every day becomes a mission of the Lord: both the great and the small, both health and sickness, both peace and struggle... Thus, we learn to live in the "Kairos"; that is, in the NOW of God, which has been widely opened to us thanks to Our Lord!