

24. January 2023

The legacy of St. Francis de Sales

Ps 37:3-4,5-6,30-31

Put your trust in the Lord and do right, make your home in the land and live secure. Make the Lord your joy and he will give you your heart's desires. Commit your destiny to the Lord, 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 Saint Francis de Sales. He lived from 1567 to 1622, was bishop of Geneva, founded a religious order and left us a legacy of valuable writings on spirituality, which bear witness to his profound inner life. The best known are the "Philothea" - or "Introduction to the Devout Life" - and the "Treatise on the Love of God". St. Francis de Sales is considered the "saint of gentleness", after he struggled throughout his life to restrain his wrathful temperament. He was a good guide of souls and among his spiritual daughters St. Jeanne de Chantal stands out.

But his teaching is not only addressed to the consecrated; he also offers help for the path of sanctification of those who live in the world. The "Philothea" in particular is of great value in this respect, and to this day is a very useful reading for anyone who wants to deepen his or her spiritual journey.

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

"My past no longer concerns me. It belongs to Divine mercy. My future does not yet concern me. It belongs to Divine providence. What concerns me and what challenges me is today, which belongs to God's grace and to the devotion of my heart and my good will. "

Let us begin with the first part of this sentence:

"My past no longer concerns me. It belongs to Divine mercy."

St. Paul too - whose conversion we will celebrate tomorrow - exhorts us to forget the things that are behind us, and to extend ourselves to the things that are ahead (cf. Phil 3:13). This is not simply a forgetting, let alone a repression of the uncomfortable things of the past; of faults and failures. No, it is not that... Rather, it is the certainty that all that past has already been deposited in God's mercy, and is therefore in His hands.

If we have already received forgiveness for our sins in confession, with appropriate repentance, then God invites us to look forward. He no longer imputes our sins to us and no longer holds them against us. But the remembrance of our own guilt can help us to be merciful to others, to always keep in mind the forgiving love of God and to take up our path with vigilance.

Thus, we can even profit from a sinful past; but it should never afflict us with sorrow; nor should we actualise it again and again by constantly reproaching ourselves for our faults, for then we would be snatching our past from the sea of God's mercy and, in the worst case, we would be putting it under the dominion of the Accuser. We must take this point to heart and internalise it, because it is the Accuser who wants to use such situations from the past to torment people. And this counts for ourselves as well as for others. If someone has been converted and God has forgiven his faults, we must give him the opportunity to start afresh, and not bind him to his past with our accusations.

St. Francis' saying goes like this:

"My future does not yet concern me. It belongs to Divine providence."

This point refers to the worries about the future, which so often and unnecessarily occupy our thoughts, making us forget the spiritual reality that God holds the future in His hands. This must not be merely a pious wish; it must be a living reality. For this, it is necessary that we educate ourselves interiorly and, through prayer, put the necessary limits to the spirit of worry. With these words, St. Francis is certainly not referring to those things which are in our responsibility to shape the future; but to those things which we unnecessarily occupy ourselves with, even though they are not even in our hands, and yet our thoughts revolve around them... Here a definite act of

trust in God is required, and every time unnecessary worries reappear, we have to actualise this decision. We can question whether, deep down, perhaps we do not want to let go completely, because the worries have become part of our life, to the point where it seems to us that they correspond to our identity.

And St. Francis de Sales concludes:

"What concerns me and what challenges me is today, which belongs to God's grace and to the devotion of my heart and my good will."

With these last words, the saint touches on the decisive point: we must live TODAY! This is how we shape the future! The present is also permeated by God's grace; but this is where we can be His collaborators. Our surrender to God allows God's grace to determine every moment of our life. This will give us serenity and great confidence.

It will be a serenity that comes from the certainty of living in God's grace, accompanied by the vigilance to identify his guidance and respond to it accordingly... It is this that makes us live attentive and focused on the one thing that is necessary: to seek God first and foremost in everything, and to live in Him.

In this way, every day becomes a mission that the Lord entrusts to us: the great as well as the small, health as well as sickness, peace as well as combat... In this way, we learn to live in the "Kairos", that is, in God's NOW, in the time of grace, which has been opened wide for us thanks to Our Lord.