

29. January 2024

The Wisdom of St. Francis de Sales

For those who prefer to read a reflection on the Gospel of the Day in the Novus Ordo, here is the link: en.elijamission.net/2022/01/31

In the traditional calendar, Saint Francis de Sales is commemorated today. He was born on 21 August 1567 in the Savoy region of France. The young man, who belonged to the nobility, was initially destined for a secular career. He studied law at Paris and Padua. At the same time, he studied theology because the Calvinist doctrine of predestination caused him a crisis. After obtaining a doctorate in civil and canon law, he was to become a senator, but despite his father's opposition, he decided to become a priest.

He was appointed Bishop of Geneva in 1602, after having spent four years as a priest in the Calvinist region of Chablais, converting it to the Catholic faith. In 1610, together with Jeanne-Françoise de Chantal, he founded the Order of the Visitation of the Holy Mary - also known as the Salesian Sisters - which combined a life of prayer and contemplation with concrete works of charity.

St Francis de Sales was a great spiritual director who made great efforts to bring back to the Catholic Church those Christians who had fallen into the Calvinist heresy. He died in Lyon (France) on 28 December 1622. To this day, many believers derive spiritual benefit from his books, especially the so-called "Philothea", which is a brief summary of basic Catholic truths and the spiritual path. Because of his writings, he is to this day honoured as a Doctor of the Church.

Much could be said about St Francis de Sales, but today I would like to dwell on some of his wise sayings, which encapsulate the gentleness of his spiritual teaching. St Francis preferred to pass on his teaching like delicious honey rather than the bitter herb of harsh words. This does not detract from the fact that he could speak with great clarity when it came to defending Catholic doctrine. But he avoided creating controversy in debates.

Let us listen carefully to some of his phrases and try to taste the "honey" of his sound spiritual teaching:

"Do not lose your inner peace for anything whatsoever, even if your whole world seems upset".

How, then, can we attain and maintain this inner peace in the midst of the difficulties that surround us?

Well, true peace comes only from God. "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you*" says Jesus (Jn 14:27). So, first of all, it is peace with God that will give us a clear conscience. From there we will be able to make our contribution to living in peace with all people (Rom 12:18).

It is this peace that we must defend when external or internal events try to take it away from us. In such situations our focus should not be on the evil or the danger that seeks to take away our peace. Rather, we must cling to God, focus our attention on Him, and call upon His name. In these situations it is advisable to begin to pray inwardly and to try to keep ourselves in this prayer so that our "inner castle" is protected and we can remain in the presence of God who dwells within us and from there face and overcome the fear that threatens us.

The following sentence by St. Francis de Sales has a similar character, because it invites us to look at everything that comes our way from God's perspective: "Don't face what lies ahead with fear, but with hope".

In God there will always be a solution - and it will be a good one - even if it is a difficult stage in our life's journey. Let us remember that hope is a theological virtue that unites us with the Lord. It is not to be confused with mere human optimism, but rather with a firm trust in God's goodness, wisdom and omnipotence. Therefore, we can look to the future without fear, trying to overcome, through prayer and trust in the Lord, all feelings of anxiety and all our fears about the future.

The saint says: "The loss of love is the only loss we have to fear in this life".

And so it is, for it is love that gives light and clarity to everything! Whatever I do, moved by true love, acquires divine splendour and attains its highest value. Let us recall the

words of Saint Paul: *"And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, (...) but have not love, I am nothing"* (1 Cor 13:2).

Therefore, we must be careful not to offend love, whether it be love of God or love of neighbour, and even love of self, properly understood.

But even more effective than being careful not to offend love is learning to do everything out of love for God, so that it becomes natural for us to act in the Spirit of the Lord. Then love will grow!

So much for a brief appreciation of the wisdom of this kind Doctor of the Church, whose writings continue to edify us to this day and can help us move forward on our spiritual journey.