THE GENTLEMAN SAINT – WISE & CENTERED

Today, January 24th, is the Feast of St. Francis de Sales, the patron of my religious congregation, the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. That’s what the letters ‘OSFS’ stand for after my name (like the Franciscans’ OFM, or the Jesuits’ SJ, or the Paulists’ CSP). In light of St. Francis’ feast and because the mission of my religious congregation is to spread the spirituality and charism of St. Francis, I’d like to share with you something about this great saint who lived from 1567-1622, who is the patron of writers and authors.

I have to call on him often for inspiration, since so much of a priest’s life is spent writing and reflecting, shaping words and ideas, speaking and communicating (or at least, trying to do so). While he lived over four hundred years ago, I think that there is a lot in St. Francis de Sales’ life that resonates with our lives here in the East Bay area, and I believe he has much to offer us as we struggle to be faithful and effective as Catholic Christians, as community members, as people who want to make a difference in our ever-changing world. I’ll name just two ways that he can be a guide to us today: in ongoing education, and in finding peace in the midst of our busyness.

Francis championed education. He often counseled the need for continuing education among his clergy, imploring them with the notion that "knowledge is the eighth sacrament for the hierarchy of the Church." He was educated by the Jesuits in Paris and, at a very early age, earned degrees in both civil law and theology. As Bishop of Geneva, he was instrumental in bringing together intellectual leaders of his day and he helped to plant the seeds for what many believe was later to become the Académie française, the French Academy – a 17th century “think tank” of critical and studious minds. Here, I think, Francis can be a fellow companion. If we were to pool the educational background of our parishioners and of society in our area, we would find a vast and sophisticated wealth of knowledge, both in earned degrees, as well as practical experience in education and the arts, in banking and business, in medicine and engineering, in science and technology. Too often our religious and spiritual life is kept separate from our intellectual pursuits. For Francis, our minds and hearts need to be united; faith and reason ought to work together for greater growth and understanding. As bishop of Geneva, Francis de Sales took the then controversial step to defend publicly the methodology proper to scientific reasoning, as distinct from knowledge gained through faith. Science and religion are not opponents. We should never stop reading and studying. Our faith calls us to be lifelong learners.

I was talking with some parishioners once about some of the current crises in the Church. That often happens at gatherings with parishioners -- the clergy shortage being one of the frequent topics. Our
intellect tells us, as it told them, that there are some obvious solutions to this dilemma which the Church should pursue — re-enlisting even a few of the thousands of ordained clergy who have left the priesthood to marry or pursue other careers; opening the priesthood to married men, and, perhaps one day, to women who feel called by God to serve the Church in the priesthood. Rather than avoid these conversations and topics, I think de Sales would encourage dialogue and discussion — bringing our intellect and intelligence to bear on the pressing issues we face in Church and in society. He would not be content with Church authority setting limits on what we can and cannot discuss as rational, thinking, and yes, faithful Catholics. He might have used a slogan we’ve often heard: “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.”

A second quality of “Salesian spirituality,” as it’s commonly called, is finding peace in the midst of our busyness. You know, if you ask school children today, even in the youngest grades, what their biggest problem is, they say “stress.” What kind of world have we created when even youth are so overwhelmed with pressures and demands that they feel “stressed out”? I don’t think it was so different for St. Francis and his contemporaries in the 16th century. St. Francis wore many hats and had to be many things to many people. He was a bishop and administrator of a large diocese which was undergoing both theological and military struggles during the period of the Calvinist Reformation. He was an author of books, pamphlets to evangelize people who had left the Church, and thousands of letters of spiritual guidance -- letters being the common means of communication. Together with St. Jane de Chantal he founded a religious order of women. He was a pastoral leader and traveled over vast regions to reach out to the members of his flock. He would never have known the term, but he was a “multi-tasker” to the nth degree. Yet, he maintained a spirit of calm and inner peace that earned him the title — the “gentleman saint.”

Here’s how he did it, in his own words:

*We must try to keep our hearts continually, unshakably serene throughout the changes of life. Even though everything turns and changes around us, we must ever remain steady — always looking, striving and aspiring toward God. No matter what course our ship takes, no matter whether it sails to the east, west, north or south, no matter what winds drive it on, the mariner’s needle never points in any direction except toward the pole star. Everything may be topsy-turvy, not only around us, but within us as well. But whether we are sad or happy, full of sweetness or bitterness, at peace or disturbed, filled with light or darkness, troubled or at rest, delighted or disgusted, scorched by the sun or refreshed by the dew — for all that, the fine point of our heart, our higher will, which is our compass, must ever look and tend toward the love of God, its Creator, its Savior, its only and highest good.*

Those are the inspired words of someone who was in touch with his deepest core and who drank deeply from the well of God’s unfailing love. That peace, Francis assures us, can be ours if we continually bring our minds and hearts back to God.

De Sales was able to keep a balance between his work in the world and his life in the Spirit because of his focus. Whatever he was doing at any given moment he gave himself to it wholeheartedly. He said: *Why build castles in Spain when you live in France?* He fulfilled the obligation that was before him, giving himself eagerly and completely to the task at hand. He didn’t distract himself with idle speculation about
what ‘could’ be. He said: Be who you are and be that well! He lived in the present moment, accepting both its joys and its sufferings, knowing that fulfilling the will of God, as it was presented to him here and now, was the surest way to salvation and the most satisfying way to live.

Since New Years Day I’ve presided at six funeral Masses and a graveside service of loved ones whom parishioners have lost. It has been difficult for these families and friends, but their faith has helped them bear their loss. One of the Corporal Works of Mercy is “to bury the dead;” it’s our Christian obligation. One parishioner once sent me an email which I know she wouldn’t mind my sharing with you: “Dear Father John, it is very difficult for me to talk about my mom without crying. She loved me, taught me about God, faith, and always taught me the right thing to do. She was 92 and lived so long because she had purpose. She helped my brother and his family manage their schedules of shift work. She was the center of our family, content to be at home. She rarely thought of herself, and if she did, others were put before her. She loved to cook and have gatherings in her home. She kept every card ever sent to her and collected religious cards, books, and had an altar in her dining room. She displayed what was important to her in her home and we knew what she believed in. During the last few months, she suffered congestive heart failure. We understood so little at the time. She wanted to be surrounded by her children. We all took turns caring for her. She left this prayer on her buffet. Maybe she prayed it herself when she turned her daily calendar. These words are giving me much comfort and I know she knew we would need them.”

Have no fear for what tomorrow may bring. The same loving God Who cares for you today will take care of you tomorrow and every day. God will either

shield you from suffering or give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace then, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.

The words of St. Francis de Sales.

So, do me a favor and help me to carry out my mission as an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales in spreading his spirituality. Do some internet searching and google “St. Francis de Sales.” Download some of his writings or order a book about him or one that contains his writings. I think you’ll find that he will engage your mind, inspire your heart, even reduce your stress level. He will certainly open a path for you to experience God’s unfailing mercy and love. But, most of all, live in the spirit of authenticity and integrity that de Sales promoted in his living and his writing when he said: Be who you are and be that well!

Fr. John Kasper, OSFS