

Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology

Spring 2013

SP 2505 Spirituality of St Francis de Sales

3.0 units (5 ECTS) – Tuesday/Friday: 8.10-9.30: DSPT Classroom 1

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Course Description

Francis de Sales was one of the first to articulate a lay spirituality in the Church – and Vatican II cited this gentle bishop of Geneva when describing the Universal Call to Holiness (*Lumen Gentium*, 39-42).

This course offers a general history of the life, work and thought of this missionary, bishop, founder and doctor of the Church. Students will examine the major themes of his spiritual teaching: *personal devotion, gentle responsibility, daily life and love of God*.

The special role of St Jane-Frances de Chantal is highlighted in synthesizing the impact of Salesian thought on the spiritual and pastoral life of the Church.

Goals and objectives

Teaching method: HS2505 is primarily a lecture course. My presentations will highlight principal points of Francis de Sales' life and teaching. I will make use of PowerPoint or other means to help you to have a visual appreciation of his life and times; I will provide a text to coincide with my lectures so as to develop these areas in greater depth. At key intervals we will dedicate time to group work and class discussion.

Student roles: While I hope to provide you with positive input, I want to say that I believe that you and your classmates have the greatest role in creating a good learning environment. In this context, let me state clearly what are my expectations in terms of your participation in the course. I expect that you will attend all the class sessions; if there is a serious reason that prevents you from doing so, I would appreciate your speaking to me about your absence. I expect that you will participate in all group projects, giving everyone a chance to speak and building on one another's contributions (I believe that students add breadth and depth to the course for one another through class participation). Finally, I expect that you will complete your reading and written assignments in a timely fashion.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this course, you will have gained an overview of the life and works of Francis de Sales, originator of the Salesian spirit and pastoral approach.

You will have learned the Salesian principles of Christian life and pastoral practice, honed skills in critical analysis of classical Salesian texts through participation in group discussions and by developing short written summaries of the main points of the teachings of Francis de Sales.

Tools for assessment

In addition to attending lectures and actively participating in class discussions, your progress in this course will be assessed on the basis of a mid-term exam and five (5) short reflection papers. The reflection papers grow out of the reading of primary sources and small-group discussions; due dates are distributed throughout the semester.

Scheduling

SP2505 is slated to meet on Tuesdays and Fridays during 1st Period (8:10-9:30). During the first class meeting, we will firm up the instruction calendar and due dates for assignments. A commitment in Rome necessitates my absence during the second half of the Fall Term; lecture schedules and reading deadlines will be finalized during the first week of class.

Texts

Required reading:

Boenzi, Joseph. *Saint Francis de Sales: Life and Spirit*. Stella Niagara: DeSales Resources, 2013. [\$24.00]

François de Sales, Saint. *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Complete and unabridged; translated and edited by Armid Nazareth, Antony Mookenthittam, and Anthony Kolencherry. 3d rev. ed. Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2002. [ISBN: 81-85376-46-8; cost \$9.00]

Course Outline

Introduction to the Life and Works of St Francis de Sales

Beginning with a brief survey of the historical and geographical context for the life and ministry of Francis de Sales (1567-1622), consideration is given to how the writings of this exiled bishop of Geneva can have meaning at a distance of 400 years.

Biographical notes on Francis de Sales

In the second unit, we trace his life in broad strokes. How did his environment and early childhood shape his awareness of God’s call (education and vocation)? How did he face crisis in his youth? By overcoming doubt and grief, he was empowered to bring heart back into Christianity, especially during his years as a missionary among the Calvinists of Savoy.

His missionary experience prepares him to become bishop of the most contentious see in Christendom. As a bishop, he is beloved of the people: acknowledged as *shepherd*, *reformer* and *teacher*. He engages Calvinism. He becomes adept as an evangelizer, catechist, preacher, and director of souls.

Starting out on the Devout Life

The heart of Salesian teaching is that holiness is not just possible for all people, but everyone’s vocation! Rather than speak of *perfection* or *sanctity*, he speaks of a relationship with God in terms of *devotion*. There are different styles of devotion, but one and the same call to holiness.

Salesian Spiritual Direction and Spiritual Friendship

The devout life calls for simplicity, and Francis speaks of this in terms of “living the little virtues.” Through the saint’s correspondence, we can reconstruct his style of spiritual direction as relational: spiritual accompaniment.

In this unit, we look at Francis’ style of guiding priests and bishops, laymen and lay women. Of special significance is Francis’ friendship with the Baroness Jane Frances de Chantal.

Chantal presents new challenges for spiritual direction. Through biographical data and their correspondence – letters of spiritual direction – we trace the development of how Francis began to articulate, for Chantal and others, the spirituality of ordinary life.

Guiding friends to love God, simply and always

After years of personal spiritual accompaniment, including spiritual direction through correspondence, Francis’ friends urge him to write for a larger audience. The result was one of the great masterpieces of Christian literature, which he entitled *The Introduction to the Devout Life*. Written simply to *Philothea* about loving God and loving neighbor, the book presents a simple prayer style that was extraordinarily accessible in reference to the presuppositions of the times.

The *Introduction of the Devout Life* presents the great themes of Salesian life and spirituality – themes that Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal would develop.

Salesian Consecrated Life

With Jane-Frances de Chantal, Francis de Sales founded a new form of consecrated life: the Visitation of Holy Mary (1610). The community, opened to women young and old, single and women with families, combined contemplative prayer with service of neighbor, particularly women and families in difficulty. Here Salesian spirit becomes concrete, in a lifestyle that strives for *unity of spirit*, in prayer and work, to meet the challenges of daily life. Mother de Chantal, as co-foundress and first superior, becomes the first interpreter of Salesian spirit.

Conferences of Francis de Sales

As founder, Francis de Sales attempts to inculcate his understanding of devotion and community commitment to the first, small community of the Visitandines in Annecy. Whenever possible during the first years, between 1610 and 1615, he would spend Sunday afternoons with the sisters, and “entertain” them with instructions and commentaries in sessions of pastoral reflection. As a result, thanks to the organizational acumen of Mother de Chantal, *The True Spiritual Conferences* were composed and published (posthumously). These writings began as gatherings, sharings, formative experiences that respect the listeners as well as transmit the tradition. In these conversations and dialogues, Francis as spiritual director and founder, promotes human and spiritual growth in the spirit of the devout life.

Francis de Sales and Spiritual Traditions of the West

In an attempt to put some system into Salesian spiritual teaching, we take a step back and attempt to place Francis de Sales within the context of the spiritual and doctrinal trends of the times. We look at his sources (French, Spanish, Italian), the traditions of the great Founders (call, response, dialogue), and trace Francis’ relational approach of studying spiritual lives rather than scholarly tomes.

Francis de Sales and Spiritual Theology

To understand Francis de Sales’ theological approach, it is again important to step back and look at his formative years. What was the learning climate in Paris during his years in secondary school and university? What were the theological concerns that he brought to Padua, and how was did the birthplace of the Renaissance cause him to reshape his ideas about God and the world?

Thanks to Francis’ habit of note-taking, we can reconstruct the object of his own theological reflections as a young man. Later, as bishop, he was invited by the Holy See to intervene in the area of theological controversies. We are able to trace the development of his theology and his spirituality over an extended period of time. We do so in this unit, and attempt to trace the sources upon which he relied in writing his second great work, *Treatise On the Love of God*. With time and experience, Francis was able to develop a theological approach that was quite accessible to most men and women, lay and religious alike.

The Space of Interior Life

Many of our contemporaries study the spiritual masters of the past to gain insight into prayer. Francis does not speak of “spirituality” but of “interior life.” It is here that the soul meets the Creator in prayer.

To be more precise, Francis does not speak of “life” as much as he does of “space.” Interiority is not a tiny place within, but a profound place. The human soul and spirit make up a whole new world!

In describing interiority and the soul’s relationship with God, Francis describes a spiritual topography, with peaks and valleys. *Space* and *structure* are needed for interior life, but not in a static way. More than terrain to survey, interiority presupposes a path to be taken... Francis’ terminology is dynamic, fluid, but also ambiguous. Still, in so many words and images, he makes it understood that spirituality is for everyone. In this sense and for this reason, Prayer is as simple as it is intense.

Towards a spirituality of Ordinary Life

One does not love God automatically, or immediately. It is necessary to grow in God’s love, and we do so by degrees or stages.

Francis de Sales list four stages for growing in the love of God: 1) Young Love, Weak but True; 2) loving God among many others; 3) loving God along with many others; 4) God is the One and Only Love.

Growth may be gradual, but, using the image of journey, it must be a continuous moving forward. Francis de Sales knows this. He journeys along with those whom he guides and directs, encouraging them to practice virtue. He brings the need for growth into individual spiritual direction, but also in his ministry of the Word (preaching), where he constantly encourages others to pursue virtue.

Recognition of Virtues and Influence

Francis de Sales died in Lyons on 28 December 1622. The following year, as Mother de Chantal and others pushed for his canonization, the new pope, Urban VIII, enacted strenuous new rules for beatification procedures. The servant of God was the first to go through the process of Beatification and Canonization. His influence and holiness was not based on popular opinion or miracle sightings, but on the living out of the Gospel through the heroic practice of the virtues – theological, cardinal, and moral.

The beatification process of Francis de Sales set the standard for the next two centuries.

Many priests, bishops and religious looked to Saint Francis de Sales as their model in apostolic holiness. During the 19th Century, there was a renewed enthusiasm for his pastoral style and a reawakening among those who embraced a spirituality of ordinary life. The sainted bishop of Geneva came to be regarded as one who taught a more radical Catholicism. Pius IX declared him a doctor of the Church in 1877.

During the 20th Century, on the strength of that doctorate, he came to be seen as originator of a practical way of life – one that demonstrated the Universal Call to Holiness. Popes and bishops cite him: a) Pius XI, *Rerum Ominum Perturbationem* (Encyclical, 1923); b) Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964) §39-42; c) Paul VI, *Sabaudiae Gemma* (Apostolic Letter, 1967); d) John Paul II, *Fountain of Life* (Discourse, 1988).

Francis de Sales as Preacher

The biographies speak of Francis' efficacy as evangelizer and preacher. He became well-known in Savoy and France for preaching missions, and Advent or Lenten series. Unlike the preachers of the day, who often imitated literary and political orators, Francis de Sales seems to preach out of the biblical and Patristic tradition. His ministry is more mystic than philosophical.

Marian spirituality

Salesian spirituality is Marian, and Francis concentrates on the Motherhood of Mary as a way of coming closer to Christ.

Many aspects of his Marian spirituality are rooted in the experience of the Visitation. Francis de Sales and Jane-Frances de Chantal reflect on the *hidden years* of Jesus' growing years in Nazareth. They accept to live a *hidden life in the hidden Jesus*, living in *the Heart of Christ*.

Salesian groups and movements in the Church

Bringing our study of Francis de Sales out of the 17th Century and into contemporary cultural circumstances, we attempt to understand how his teaching and pastoral example has become concrete in specific communities and institutions. We make a quick survey of the Religious of the Visitation of Holy Mary (founded 1610), and then at institutes that take their spirit from Francis de Sales. Among these, we look at St John Bosco (1815-1888), founder of the Salesian Society. How have Salesians understood Francis de Sales: as contemplative? or as shepherd of souls? or as both?