

Salesian Vision of Holiness: A Spirituality for the Imperfect

"We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures. We are the sum of the love of God and of his son, our Lord Jesus Christ." (John Paul II).

Introduction

Fr. Ryan's first presentation focused on "A Basic Vision of Holiness and Vocation." I would like to talk about St. Francis de Sales' conception of holiness, and characterize it as a spirituality for the imperfect.

Signs of Getting Older:

Those of you who are from my era will appreciate and identify with the following signs of getting older, and those of you who don't at this time, will certainly get to recognize them soon enough. So here they are:

Getting Older

You know all the answers, but nobody asks you any questions
You get winded playing checkers
You stop to think and sometimes forget to start again
You finally get it all together, but you can't remember where you put it
Everything hurts and what doesn't doesn't work
You feel like the morning after and you haven't been anywhere
You join a health club and never go

These are some of the imperfections that many of us have to live with.

Perfection – Struggling Against Our Imperfections

So we all know what imperfections and limitations are. We see them and are surrounded by them. The puzzler for us is: "What's perfection?" It's a word that frightens people, just as the notion of holiness frightened people in St. Francis de Sales' time. The very idea of seeking after perfection is a "turn-off" for many people simply because it connotes the idea of being flawless or without any faults or shortcomings, and they just cannot picture themselves in this way.

Ordinarily, the word 'perfectionist' does not have a favorable connotation in our language because it conjures up for us a person who appears to be always dissatisfied and impatient with himself/herself and many times with others who do not measure up to his/her impossible standards. There is no doubt that perfectionists, at times, have given humankind a legacy of great achievements in many fields, especially in literature and the arts, and have enriched us all but usually at a very great price to themselves and those who work with them or who are close to them. Perfectionists carry the image or images of an ideal that is never realizable in this life. We certainly admire their striving, their relentless dedication, their inexhaustible effort but not their basic discontent and dissatisfaction with themselves and with others. All of us have certainly met people of this kind.

It is their discontent and their dissatisfaction that turn us off. Since the very idea of perfection was a turn-off, St. Francis de Sales tried to present the pursuit of holiness in such a way that it would be a "turn-on" for everyone, but especially for lay people, who considered it to be simply out of their reach and frankly unattractive and unappealing - particularly the distorted notions of holiness that were floating around in his day and exist in various forms in our own day. This is why his stated purpose in the first part of the *Introduction to a Devout Life* is to turn the simple desire for holiness into a firm resolution by making it attractive and realizable. He envisions perfection as consisting in struggling against our imperfections. Here's what he says in one of the opening chapters of this spiritual classic with which you are all familiar:

The work of purging the soul neither can nor should end except with our life itself. We must not be disturbed at our imperfections, since for us **perfection consists in fighting against them**.(emphasis added.) How can we fight against them unless we face them? Our victory does not consist in not being aware of them, but in not consenting to them. . . . Fortunately for us, in this war we are always victorious provided that we are willing to fight" (*Devout Life*, I, chp. 5 On Purifying the Soul, 48-49).

Now that's a view of perfection or holiness I think we all can readily identify with and that can serve us well in our formation programs. Francis says in effect that we are always winners as long as we are willing to fight. ("we are always victorious provided that we are willing to fight").

De Sales had to deal with a number of persons who were too eager to become perfect and had unrealistic ideas about holiness and perfection. He gives advice to one young woman who was down on herself because of her spiritual failures. This is what he wrote to her: "For I am sure you will note that those interior troubles you have suffered have been caused by a great multitude of considerations and desires produced by an intense eagerness to attain some imaginary perfection. I mean that your imagination had formed for you an ideal of absolute perfection, to which your will wished to lift itself; but frightened by this great difficulty -- or rather impossibility -- it remained in dangerous travail." Essentially, he tells her to relax and not be so uptight about becoming perfect and consoles her with these words, " We [have to put up with] our imperfection[s] in order to have perfection" (Cited in *Thy Will Be Done*, pp. 169 & 170).

"God Comes Through the Wound"

St. Francis de Sales envisions striving after perfection as a struggle, as a battle that inevitably leaves us battle-scarred and wounded. This is perhaps why he was so fond of Scuopoli's *The Spiritual Combat*, which he carried around with him and read a page or two of it every day. As long as we are willing to fight, to struggle; he confidently tells us, we will be victorious because, as one writer puts it, "imperfection is rather the crack in the armor, the 'wound' that lets 'God' in" (Kurtz, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 28). It is "at the very point of vulnerability... where the surrender takes place - that is where God enters. God comes through the wound" (Marion Woodman, cited in Kurtz 29).

Shortly after we deposed Saddam Hussein and his regime in Iraq, you probably saw on your TV screens Shiite Moslems processing on the most Holy Day of their religion in Nafja. They flagellated themselves with chains and other sharp instruments to cut open their flesh causing it to bleed. Although we might find this behavior strange and abhorrent, they understand it as a

way of trying to let God into their lives through their physical as well as their spiritual wounds. For them, it is a way of opening themselves to God.

Sin and Spirituality

These wounds are what religion calls our 'sins', psychologists our 'sickness' and philosophy terms our 'errors'. De Sales has a very comforting and consoling observation about our sins with regard to striving for perfection. "Sin is shameful," he says, "only when we commit it; when it has been converted by confession and repentance it becomes honorable and salutary" (*Devout Life*, I, chp. 19, p. 71). This is reminiscent of the "*O felix culpa*" ("O happy fault") of the Exsultet sung at the Easter Vigil. St. Francis de Sales expresses this same idea with regard to our imperfections: "Hate your imperfections," he says, "because they are imperfections but love them because they make you see your nothingness and emptiness and are subject to the exercise of the perfection, power and mercy of God" (OEA, 13, 167). So we are to have a kind of love-hate relationship with our imperfections. Hate them because they get in the way of our getting closer to God and to one another, but love them because they are the wounds that let God in.

Myth of Orestes

A similar idea is expressed by Scott Peck in his best seller *The Road Less Traveled* when he interprets the myth of Orestes. You may recall that Orestes' father, Agamemnon, was killed by Orestes' mother, Clytemnestra, as the result of a curse that was placed on this family. This crime brought down a curse on Orestes' head because the Greek code of honor obliged Orestes to avenge his father by killing his murderer. However, the greatest sin that one could commit in Greek society was matricide. This put Orestes between a rock and a hard place. After agonizing on what to do, he finally killed his mother. For this unspeakable crime Orestes was tormented night and day by the Furies, whom he alone could see. After being haunted by the Furies for years, he could no longer stand it and asked the gods to remove the curse. A trial was held. Even though the god Appollo took up Orestes' defense and tried to excuse him, Orestes, to the amazement of all, accepted complete responsibility for his heinous crime. Because of his honesty, the gods decided to remove the curse and sent him Eumenides, good spirits.

Peck uses this story to illustrate the point that "the unwanted and painful symptoms of mental illness are manifestations of grace" (p. 290). Grace entered into Orestes' life when he took responsibility for his action, for his sin. This transformation is symbolized by the Furies, the manifestations of his imperfections, being changed into Eumenides, which means "the bearers of grace." So in a real sense, grace and hence God came into his life through his very wounds when he accepted responsibility for his crime. From the Christian perspective, God comes to us when we not only accept responsibility for our sins and imperfections but when we repent of them, honestly and sincerely. This is similar to what de Sales means about our sins being something salutary and healthy for us when they are transformed by repentance.

Jesus' story of God rejoicing over one sinner who repents more than over the ninety-nine that have no need of repentance is somewhat disconcerting because it appears that "God is closer to sinners than to saints." It seems that sin can bring us closer to God. The late Fr. Anthony de Mello, the Indian Jesuit, described this idea in a story that he adapted. "God in heaven holds each person by a string. When you sin, you cut the string. Then God ties it up again, making a knot - and thereby bringing you a little closer to him. Again and again your sins cut the string - and with each further knot, God keeps drawing you closer and closer" (Retold by Anthony

Mello, *One Minute Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday-Image, 1988), p. 116 as cited by Kurtz, p. 29).

A little caution is needed here. This image can only go so far because it can imply that we are mere puppets on a string, and it can easily give the impression that to get closer to God we have to sin. And we all know what St. Paul has to say about that, viz., that we do not sin so that grace can abound in us. (See Rom. 6:1).

To Be Human Is To Be Imperfect

Because of cultural differences, a number of you might not appreciate this analogy from the game of baseball. So I beg for your indulgence. Former Baseball Commissioner Francis Vincent related the game of baseball to life in the following way: "Baseball teaches us. . . how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often - those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players" (as cited by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p. 1).

The authors of the book, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, paraphrase Vincent and note that this is what we learn from spirituality, from holiness, viz., it teaches us "how to deal with failure" and to accept the fact that error is an inescapable part of life. So in this view, saints are people who fail less often. The great temptation that has spelled tragedy not only for Adam and Eve, but for all of humanity is to seek to become like God - knowing all, controlling all, and without flaws. An authentic spirituality, a genuine holiness "involves learning how to live with imperfection," with our errors and accepting the fact that we are not God. (Kurtz 18).

To be able to live with failure is not, obviously, the same thing as being a failure or being a loser because these epithets are generally applied to people who are not consistently striving to improve themselves and do not keep aiming at the bull's eye, but who have rather given up on themselves. Many of these people suffer from a very poor self-image or an unrealistic or inflated self-image and lack true self-understanding and self-acceptance, especially the loser. We will be saying something a little later in this talk about self-knowledge and self-acceptance.

Maintaining a Balance ("Inspired Common Sense")

Awareness and acknowledgement of our shortcomings and imperfections can help us maintain a balance in our lives, something that is very basic to Salesian spirituality. Elizabeth Stopp, the English Salesian Scholar, called his spirituality "inspired common sense" because it is reasonable and balanced. Our saint gets this idea across in an interesting image of a lute player tuning his instrument: "As a consummate lute player has the habit of testing the strings of his instrument from time to time to see if they need tightening or loosening in order to render the tone in perfect harmony, so it is necessary at least once a year to examine and consider all affections of our souls to see if they are in tune so as to sing the canticle of the glory of God and of our own perfection" ("Feast of the Presentation," *Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Our Lady*, p.39).

The image of the accomplished lute player needing to adjust the strings demonstrates the wonderfully balanced spirituality that our saint championed. A spirituality for the imperfect leads us to examine those areas in our lives not only where we are lax by tightening the loose strings, but also where we might be too uptight by loosening the strings that are too tight, i.e., to look at those areas in our spiritual life where we might be unduly demanding of ourselves and of

others. Just as a lute player has to adjust his strings and maintain a proper balance between being too loose or too tight, so do we if we want to make beautiful music by the kind of lives we lead.

Consoling Examples:

Our saint consoles us with many other observations on the nature of perfection that does not put it out of our reach but has a great appeal to the imperfect, i.e., to all of us who too often feel the weight of our humanity heavy on our shoulders and those of others. He reminds us that there is a big difference between being in the state of perfection and being perfect. "there still is a difference between the state of perfection and perfection itself. All bishops and religious are in the state of perfection, yet not all of them have arrived at perfection itself, as is only too plainly to be seen" (Devout Life, III, ch. 11 "Obedience", p. 154).

Furthermore, he reminds us that even great saints lacked balance or common sense, at times, and fell short of the perfection they were striving for. "It sometimes [happens to] souls in the rank of unique and perfect lovers to forget themselves and fail badly, even going so far as to commit great imperfections and annoying venial sins. This is seen for example, in certain rather bitter dissensions that have occurred among great servants of God, yes even among some of the divine Apostles. We cannot deny that they fell into certain imperfections by which charity was not actually violated but still its fervor was.... Who will deny that slight fits of anger...and other similar passions are useless and unlawful movements? Yet 'the just man' produces them 'seven times a day, ' that is, very often" (*Treatise*, Bk. 10, chp. 5, p. 155).

Along the same line, our saint leaves us with these words of encouragement: "Every person has some imperfection no matter how holy the person may be - and some perfection no matter how wicked. Created in the image of God, from Him comes all the good that he has; created from nothingness, each retains some imperfection" (SFS. *Sermons of St. Francis de Sales for Lent*, p. 163).

We know that the people who do parish bulletins strive to make them as perfect as possible and free of any flaws. But occasionally a blooper or two does creep in like this one: "On Sunday, a special collection will be taken to defray the expense of the new carpet. All wishing to do something on the carpet, please come forward and get a piece of paper." Another one read: "Tonight's sermon: 'What is hell?' Come early and listen to our choir practice." Bloopers like these remind us of our imperfect humanity.

Self-Awareness and Self-Acceptance

You will recall that Francis de Sales tells us that we can't fight against our imperfections unless we face them. He asks, "How can we fight against them unless we face them?" There are several ways which he recommends to help us confront them and to succeed in this struggle. This involves the practice of the virtues of humility, patience and gentleness that lead to self-knowledge and a high level of self-acceptance as well as prayer and knowing how to direct our intention.

The following true story helps us to appreciate the importance of self-knowledge and self-acceptance. One day Fr. Finnegan had a visit from a father and his son who had Downs syndrome. As the father went to confession, the son waited in an adjoining room. After the

father was finished, he said that his son also wanted to go to confession. Fr. Finnegan, not knowing exactly how to evaluate the level of understanding of the boy, began by asking him some questions. "What has God done for you?", he asked him. And the boy answered by giving the names of his family members and of the family pets. Then he asked him, "And what have you done for God," The boy answered, "I be me."

This response certainly shows a level of understanding, of self-acceptance and of self-giving that many people unfortunately never reach in their lifetime. This supposedly retarded boy considered the members of his family and the family pets as gifts from God and clearly understood that the most precious and most valuable gift he could give back to God was himself. In a word, he saw the hand of God, the sacred, manifested in his relationship to the members of his family and also to God's creation. He had true humility as Francis de Sales describes it in the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, viz., a virtue that flows from a truthful and grateful acknowledgment of the general and particular gifts that God has given us.

The virtue of humility is based on the whole truth about ourselves. Although humility is an acknowledgment of our greatness and giftedness, it is also an acceptance of the totality of our being, of our grandeur and of our littleness, or as our saint puts it 'our abjection,[which] is lowliness, meanness and baseness in us.' In this sense, the virtue of humility is akin to the expression "poor in spirit" praised by Jesus as one of the beatitudes. For de Sales, "humility is true knowledge and voluntary acknowledgment of our abjection" (*Devout Life*, III, ch. 6, p. 139). In fact, it is a love of our abjection. This expression might, at first, repel us since it seems to suggest that we should be down on ourselves. I think that Dr. Wendy Wright, a well-known Salesian scholar, has captured the essence of what de Sales means when he says that humility is loving our abjections:

To love our abjections is to love ourselves as we are loved, in our wholeness. It is also to have compassion for ourselves. It is to see that the true place of transformation is not in our gifts but in our weaknesses. It is to know ourselves wounded yet beloved and thus to know each other most truly. It is not in our strengths that we find each other, but in our lack. For in our need we call each other forth. To love our abjections is to shatter the images of self-perfection we would like to project. It is thus to enter into the mystery of loving all that is human, and from there to begin to love all humans truly. (*Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God*, p. 87)

This beautifully ties together the importance of the virtue humility for loving ourselves as God loves us and laying the foundation of loving others in their "blessedness and brokenness" (W. Wright). Loving our abjections makes us love ourselves as we are loved by God and opens us to loving others. That is a very great insight into the nature of Salesian humility.

This notion of self-acceptance based on true humility would not square well with those who believe such an approach is detrimental to our self-esteem. It does, however, form the basis of Salesian spirituality and of the spirituality of communion. De Sales conceived all being as emanating from two principles - one God, which accounts for all the goodness that is in us, the other nothingness, which is the source of our imperfections and shortcomings. "Thus in every rational creature there is found perfection and imperfection, signs of the two principles from which it has come forth into existence" (*The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales Given in Lent, 1622*, p. 161). Even the angels have, so to speak, a bit of the devil in them. "This is universally

true not only among human creatures, but also among the angels, for their perfection is not free from imperfection" (*Ibid.*, 163). So a spirituality for the imperfect requires us to face honestly and courageously all aspects of our being.

It is interesting to note how closely the thought of St. Francis de Sales parallels that of the book *The Spirituality of Imperfection* : "A spirituality of imperfection suggests that spirituality's first step involves facing *self* squarely, seeing one's self as one is: mixed-up, paradoxical, incomplete, and imperfect. Flawedness is the first fact about human beings. And paradoxically, in that imperfect foundation, we find not despair but joy. For it is only within the reality of our imperfection that we can find the peace and serenity we crave" (p. 20).

The note of joy and optimism that is struck here resonates with the Salesian vision of spirituality, which exudes these two characteristics despite our limitations, shortcomings and imperfections. It sees in them the need that we have for God to exercise his goodness, mercy and love in us even though there is such an infinite disparity and a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between us - - between perfection and imperfection. De Sales' joy and optimism are founded on his tendency to emphasize our affinity with God based both on similarity (we are made in his image and likeness) and dissimilarity: "In addition to this [affinity] based on likeness there is an unparalleled correspondence between God and man because of their reciprocal perfection. This does not mean that God can receive any perfection from man. But just as man cannot be perfected except by the divine goodness, so also divine goodness can rightly exercise its perfection outside itself nowhere so well as upon our humanity. The one has great need and capacity to receive good; the other has great abundance and great inclination to bestow it" (*Treatise*, vol. 1, p. 91).

Solidarity With Other Human Beings

An acceptance of our imperfections which leads to the virtue of humility lays the foundation for a spirituality of communion. As I have mentioned, Francis de Sales was fond of saying that if we are all made in the image and likeness of God, then we are made in the image and likeness of one another. But it is not only this truth that binds us to others and gives us joy and hope. A knowledge and ready acceptance of our imperfections is also a source of joy, optimism and hope because it links us with other human beings. "There is less to fear in the vision of self as ordinary, imperfect, and limited - *neither* devil *nor* angel, but *both* ." This naturally leads to "an awareness of a connection with others who are also, inevitably, imperfect and with the world, which, because it is made up of imperfect beings does not demand perfection of us" (Kurtz, p. 232). This connectedness is a great source of consolation and helps us to bear more patiently and lovingly with our own imperfections and those of others. As a German proverb says, "A joy shared is doubled; a pain shared is halved." Well, we all share the pain of our imperfections. In that knowledge and in that sharing, there should be a deep sense of joy because it should make us readily relate to others.

Despite this understanding of our connectedness with other imperfect people and an imperfect world, we still have quite a struggle with our imperfections and need a good deal of patience and gentleness, first with ourselves, in order to persevere. Francis gives this advice on how to deal with our imperfections: "We must not fret over our own imperfections. Although reason requires that we must be displeased and sorry whenever we commit a fault, we must refrain from bitter, gloomy, spiteful, and emotional displeasure. Many people are greatly at fault in this way.

When overcome by anger they become angry at being angry, disturbed at being disturbed, and vexed at being vexed” (Devout Life, p. 149)

It is remarkable how closely this passage reflects the thinking of the authors of *The Spirituality of Imperfection*: “Rejoice every time you discover a new imperfection” suggested the eighteenth century Jesuit spiritual director Jean-Pierre Caussade. If we find ourselves getting impatient, Caussade counseled, we can try to bear our impatience patiently. If we lose our tranquility, we can endure that loss tranquilly. If we get angry, we ought not get angry with ourselves for getting angry. If we are not content, we can try to be content with our discontent. (p. 40)

Fr. Caussade, as the chaplain of a Visitation monastery for years, was very familiar with the writings of St. Francis de Sales. More importantly, the authors quote Caussade approvingly as giving important insights into the spirituality of imperfection in a passage that reflects Salesian ideas.

Spirituality - The Mortar of Our Lives

This reflection on God's gifts and our shortcomings is certainly very helpful and necessary. However, there are times in our lives when our shortcomings and imperfections seem to be tearing us and our world apart. It is especially at those times that we desperately need something to hold our lives and our world together. One of the authors of *The Spirituality of Imperfection* compares spirituality to “the mortar in the fireplace ” (I would like to substitute cathedral for fireplace) : “Just as the mortar makes [the cathedral of Notre Dame a cathedral], allowing it to stand up straight and tall, beautiful in its wholeness, 'the spiritual' is what makes us wholly human. It holds our experiences together, shapes them into a whole, gives them meaning, allows them - and us - to be whole. Without the spiritual, however physically brave or healthy or strong we may be, however mentally smart or clever or brilliant we may be, however emotionally integrated or mature we may be, we are somehow not 'all there'" (p. 146)

For De Sales, what holds our life together is love. Love is the mortar of our lives. (See Treatise, Bk. 11, ch. 9). When we perform our actions out of love for God and for our neighbor, it acts as the mortar that holds not only our experiences together, but our relations with God and with others.

Grandeur and Littleness

To conclude this talk, I would like to cite Pope John Paul II's observations that he makes in his best seller, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, words, which are a source of great encouragement and hope. In answering the question put to him by an Italian journalist with regard to what many people in today's world consider the Pope's white cassock and such titles as “The Vicar of Christ,” “His Holiness,” etc. as both irrelevant and scandalous, the Pope responds, “Be not afraid” to be what you are because this is what Jesus said to Peter when Peter, feeling his unworthiness, his imperfections, said, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Our Lord's response, was, “Don't be afraid, I will make you a fisher of men.” As Peter was conscious of his unworthiness, so is the Pope. In words reminiscent of those of St. Francis de Sales, the Pope has Jesus respond in this fashion: “Have no Fear!” *Do not be afraid of God's mystery; do not be afraid of His love; and do not be afraid of man's weakness or of his grandeur! Man does not cease to be great, not even in his weakness. Do not be afraid of being witnesses to the dignity of every human being, from the moment of conception until death”* (p. 12).

There are no more powerful words to give us the courage to be human and to urge us to pursue a spirituality for the imperfect. In the same vein, de Sales writes to one woman seeking spiritual guidance: "Don't desire to be other than what you are, but desire to be thoroughly what you are. . . . Believe me, this is the most important and the least understood point in the spiritual life. We all love what is according to our taste; few people like what is according to their duty or to God's liking. What is the use of building castles in Spain when we have to live in France? (To Mme Brulart, June 1607, AE, XIII, 291. English trans. in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 112)

So "I be me" is the greatest gift we can give to God and to each other.

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