

THE SERMONS OF
ST. FRANCIS DE SALES
ON
PRAYER

Volume I in the Series

Translated by Nuns of the Visitation

Edited by Father Lewis S. Fiorelli, O.S.F.S.

“Prayer is so useful and necessary that without it we could not come to any good, seeing that by means of prayer we are shown how to perform all our actions well.”

—St. Francis de Sales

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The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales

Volume I	On Prayer
Volume II	On Our Lady
Volume III	For Lent
Volume IV	For Advent and Christmas
Volume V	On Consecrated Life

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ABOUT ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

St. Francis de Sales, the holy bishop, founder, and Doctor of the Church, is known throughout the Church for his great sanctity, learning, theological knowledge, gentleness, and understanding of the human soul. Through these marvelous gifts he converted and guided innumerable souls to God during his own lifetime, and re-converted thousands from Calvinism. He continues to direct many souls through his spiritual writings and published sermons. Today St. Francis de Sales is known as one of the great figures of the Catholic Counter-Reformation and of the 17th-century rebirth of Catholic mystical life.

St. Francis was born in 1567 in the castle belonging to the de Sales family in Thorens, Savoy, located in what is now southeastern France. As he grew older, the young nobleman studied literature, law, philosophy and theology in Paris and Padua, and received a doctorate in civil and canon law. Though he could have had a brilliant secular career, he set his heart on following God's call to the priesthood, and was ordained in 1593 at the age of 26. He was consecrated Bishop of Geneva at age 35, and remained the Bishop of Geneva for the remaining 20 years of his life.

Shortly after becoming a bishop, St. Francis met St. Jane Frances de Chantal, a widow; between these two saints there grew a deep spiritual friendship. St. Francis became the spiritual director of Jane Frances, and with her, he founded the religious order of nuns known as the Order of the Visitation, or the Visitandines.

St. Francis de Sales wrote two of the greatest Catholic masterpieces on the spiritual life: the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God*. The former shows how holiness is possible for all people in the state of grace, including people living in the world. This book was a bestseller in the 17th century and is still popular today. The *Treatise on the Love of God* covers all aspects of the virtue of charity, the supernatural love of God. Because of his writings, St. Francis de Sales has become the patron of writers and journalists.

St. Francis de Sales died at age 55, in the year 1622. He was canonized in 1665, and was declared a Doctor of the Universal Church by Pope Pius IX in 1877. With this declaration the Church presented the teachings of St. Francis de Sales to all the faithful as a most sure guide to true Catholic doctrine and to the ways of the spiritual life—a most sure guide to Heaven.

PREFACE

A Benedictine recently published an article entitled, “Deux âmes fraternelles: S. Bernard et S. François de Sales”—“Two Brothers in the Spirit: St. Bernard and St. Francis de Sales.” Very true! A Cistercian feels very much “at home” in listening to St. Francis. But so, I believe, will any Christian and lover of Christ.

These sermons not only begin by evoking the name of the great Abbot of Clairvaux, but have much of his style and flavor. There is the rich allegorical use of the Song of Songs in three of the sermons, and indeed of all parts of Scripture. There is hardly a line that does not contain at least a scriptural allusion. They evoke a whole array of scriptural types: Jacob, Tobit, Job, David, John the Baptist, and Paul.

At the same time St. Francis de Sales is a man of Tradition, drawing from the richness of Tradition. He uses the most ancient sources, the Fathers of the Desert, Sts. Antony and Paul; then Fathers from East and West, Sts. Gregory Nazianzen, Augustine and Jerome; as well as “The Last of the Fathers,” St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and his contemporary, St. Bruno. The Franciscans are here, too: St. Francis of Assisi, Blessed Giles and St. Bonaventure; and the Dominican tradition in St. Catherine of Siena.

Yet Francis de Sales is a man of his times—the age of scholasticism. Even if, right at the beginning of his treatment of his topic, he does bring in the age-old paradigm of *lectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplatio*, his main approach is to study his subject through its causes: the final

cause, the most important one, first; then the efficient, material and formal causes. Distinctions abound: There are three kinds of prayer, and three kinds of vocal prayer, and three kinds of sinners; four levels of prayer and four parts of mental prayer. Seeming contradictions of the Fathers are reconciled by careful distinctions, and carefully wrought syllogisms prove that neither God the Father nor Jesus, His Son, pray. Yet all this theology is never heavily labored. The rich patristic tradition with all its biblical imagery is so enfolded into it, as are St. Francis' own delightful images, that at times it cannot but evoke a smile. As a monk, I must confess I never imagined myself a pretty little bird held in the cage of the monastery to delight my Lord and King!

These sermons are well chosen for an introduction to St. Francis de Sales. They are very representative of the richness of his style. And they treat of what he himself declares to be at the heart of all his teaching: "Prayer is so useful and necessary that without it we could not come to any good." At the same time, these sermons are immediately useful for our everyday life. Francis gives us some clear understanding of the stages of growth in prayer, while still warning against getting caught up in a quest to "locate" ourselves on the journey. He has a few lucid remarks on the importance of posture and symbol, and very practical ideas on preparation for prayer, the use of ejaculations, and praying the Our Father. Most important, he reminds us that we go to prayer not to be good pray-ers or to enjoy the consolations of prayer; we go to prayer to find God and be united to Him. Seek the God of consolation and not the consolations of God. His teaching on prayer is clear, concise, and practical, and yet sublime. It goes all the way, deftly handling the graces of contemplation and the exquisite purification of all the interior faculties—while the apex of the spirit clings to God, beginning "here below what we shall do eternally in Heaven."

No matter where one is in the life of prayer, these ser-

mons can be read again and again with immense profit and fruit. We can be grateful to Father Lewis Fiorelli and to TAN Books and Publishers for making them readily available to us in English.

Father M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The four sermons on prayer contained in this book were translated from St. Francis de Sales' *Oeuvres*, vol. IX (Annecy: Niérat, 1892-1964), pp. 46-72. The Introduction entitled "Origins of the Sermons" is an excerpt from the foreword to the Annecy edition (pages v-x and xviii-xix). For the most part, the only references given here are Scriptural references. (When giving his sermons, St. Francis de Sales often paraphrased the Scriptures.) Those interested in more scholarly use of these sermons may wish to consult the Annecy edition for classical and patristic references.

INTRODUCTION

Origins of the Sermons

The sermons of St. Francis de Sales are divided into two series: those signed and those received. This division is based not only on the mode of transmission by which they have come down to us, but also upon the special character, even the very nature, of these sermons. Some have been preserved for us just as they left the pen of the orator; others, just as they fell from his lips, or at least just as they had been heard and understood by his hearer. Each of these two series has its special merit, its proper form, its determined shape. In the first, one discovers the light and lively thought of the author and sees delineated the logic of his deductions, the force of his arguments. In the second, one notices particularly the charms of his gracious and imaginative word. In both, his intelligence and his heart are revealed.

What we have just said concerns only form, but an essential difference distinguishes these two classes of sermons. The signed sermons, which for the most part had been delivered before a large public group, reveal the major lines of formal discourse; they are replete with erudition, strewn with texts from Sacred Scripture and with practical applications appropriate to the most varied situations. All the subjects of doctrine and morals, indeed even a number of points of controversy, are treated or touched upon in these sermons. This is not the case with the received sermons, which are addressed principally to a particular au-

dience, subjected to special obligations of which the preacher never loses sight. Here he applies himself more to touching souls than to instruction. It is the language of a father much more than that of a master or a pastor.

Under the rubric of "received sermons" must be included the talks given at the Chapel of the Visitation, which were written and carefully preserved by the religious who heard them. It was a precious manna which the daughters of this saintly bishop gathered up; but unlike the Israelites who put nothing aside for the next day, these sisters made provisions for the future of their institute, and even for the edification of the entire Christian people. Besides, they had had precedents in their labor. During the Lenten stations preached at Dijon and later at Grenoble, and in still other cities, St. Francis de Sales had seen men of the first rank stationed assiduously at the foot of his chair in order to write down his admirable instructions as delivered. Unfortunately these collections, which might have been of such great value for posterity, are lost today. We must be content with those which the Sisters of the Visitation have preserved for us.

Remember that the holy founder had two ways of instructing his religious. Sometimes it was in the parlor, during familiar conversations in which each one could pose questions, ask for solutions to her difficulties and seek enlightenment for her doubts.

Other times it was in the chapel of the monastery, before a restricted audience. Among these latter instructions one must make a further distinction. Some were given for solemnities in which the audience was relatively large. They reveal a very careful preparation and reveal clear and methodical divisions. Among these are found expositions of the highest mysteries of our Faith, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, Redemption, etc. Often the holy bishop cites the inspired Books, works of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and develops these citations with the smoothness, the grace and the depth with which we are familiar in him.

He proceeds in another way when, without entirely excluding others, he addresses principally his religious. It is especially in the ceremonies for clothing and profession, when the holy founder embraces some chosen soul in order to "present her to Christ as a chaste virgin," that he finds in his heart the most tender, the most moving accents. His style becomes simpler and more imaginative, all the while maintaining a grave, even at times austere, hue. And this is something remarkable: These addresses, in which one might fear a certain sameness, assume a great variety of forms. It seems that everything presents this admirable orator with the opportunity of making delightful metaphors, and of drawing practical applications which are as ingenious as they are unexpected. Ordinarily he takes inspiration from the Gospel of the day or from the life of the saint whose feast it is; frequently, too, monastic practices and circumstances which are insignificant in themselves furnish material for allusions in which a perfect grace and dignity do not preclude a delicate irony whose point is completely softened by gentleness and charity.

In these familiar instructions the Bishop of Geneva eminently justifies the title of *Evangelium loquens* ("a Speaking Gospel") which his friend St. Vincent de Paul gives him. He ceaselessly preaches renunciation of self, humility, obedience, the renunciation of all covetousness—in a word, the death of the "old man," an indispensable condition for the incorporation of people into Our Lord Jesus Christ. The holy founder does not lose sight of the fact that the Visitation is "founded spiritually on Calvary." By preference he applies himself to riveting the sights of his daughters to this redeeming mountain; and if from time to time he permits them to contemplate the radiant heights of Tabor, it is only to remind them that the hour has not yet come for pitching a tent there as long as, remaining in the bonds of the flesh, "we journey far from the Lord."

One might find it surprising that, while addressing contemplatives, the saint speaks so little to them of prayer.

There are only four sermons which deal exclusively with this fundamental subject. But one must not forget that he often deals with this question in his *Spiritual Conferences* and that, further, the *Treatise on the Love of God* gives a direction to this holy exercise which is as complete as it is profound.

The sermons which make up this volume and the following were preserved almost entirely by the two religious to whom we are already indebted for the *Conferences*: Sisters Claude-Agnès Joly de La Roche and Marie-Marguerite Michel. Happily, both were gifted with an exceptional memory; they reproduced with a remarkable fidelity the teachings of their blessed Father. Nevertheless, each left in her version so unique a personal touch that it is easy to distinguish which is to be attributed to whom. Sister Claude-Agnès' style is flowing and rapid; this choice soul is easily at home among the most sublime subjects and clearly renders theological topics and argumentation which are at times a bit difficult. She knows how, at the right moment, to put aside details of secondary interest in order to throw into relief the major lines of the sermon.

Sister Marie-Marguerite's version presents a totally different character. Practical applications and homely anecdotes are reproduced with more fidelity. But, in contrast, her pen is easily at a loss with matters which are somewhat abstract. Her heavy and prolix sentences lack clarity and precision and are not always irreproachably correct.

The verification of this difference in style has been a major help to the editors in determining the probable date of a certain number of these sermons. Following the style of the redaction, they are divided into two characteristic groupings: Those which come from Sister Claude-Agnès de La Roche date from the first years of the Institute up to her departure for Orléans (from December, 1613 until July, 1620); those which Sister Marie-Marguerite Michel preserved for us date from August, 1620 until April, 1622. It is surprising that nothing has come down to us of the in-

structions which the holy founder most probably addressed to his daughters at Annecy during the summer and fall of 1622, the last year which he spent on earth. And this is not the only lack which we must admit. However rich our collection may be, it is certain that a large part of the sermons of St. Francis de Sales have not been collected, a fact established by contemporary documents. If good intentions were never lacking, often leisure time to record the sermons was, and the religious had to be content with preserving such teachings in their heart.

In addition to the sermons preached at Annecy, we possess several which were given by the holy founder in different monasteries of the Visitation: one at Bourges, five at Lyons, one at Belley. The tone is less familiar than in the others. One senses that the preacher is less at ease in addressing an audience where he is little known; but to judge by the scope of the collection, this audience was no less attentive than that at Annecy.

Value of the Sermons

The collected sermons are the continuation and development of the *Spiritual Conferences*; the same vigor is present in them and the same spirit inspires them. As always, the holy bishop here directs consequences back to their principle. If he earnestly recommends the practice of virtues, he insists more on the generating cause which brings them about. His great desire is to bring about the soul's true foundation and rootage in charity, so that from there it may, as if without effort, rise to all devotions and sacrifices. But this charity, as this Doctor of the Church shows it to us in its radiant furnace, is nothing other than the adorable Heart of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It seems that St. Francis de Sales is always trying to direct his hearers' attention toward, and to cause all their affection to converge upon, this unique Center of all holiness.

We have said it elsewhere, but one should not fail to mention again here that the glory of this holy founder is to

have been one of the prophets of devotion to the Sacred Heart. He prepared the way for this beneficial devotion which ought to be the joy and hope of the Church in these times. As if he had a presentiment of the glorious mission destined for his Institute, he prepared it from afar to be worthy of it. [Dom Mackey is alluding to the role that the Visitandine nun, St. Margaret Mary, played in bringing about devotion to the Sacred Heart.] It is satisfying to state just how frequently in these sermons our delightful saint returns to this inexhaustible subject, and in terms which are as explicit as they are touching. Thus we will hear him assure us that the Savior “desires to give us” an abundance “of graces and blessings” and “even” His Heart; that His divine “side was opened” so that one could see the thoughts of His Heart which are thoughts “of pure and tender love”; and that “if we touch His Heart we will find it completely enflamed and burning with an incomparable love toward us.”

Although similar passages could be cited here, it is better to permit the reader the pleasure of noticing them himself. Assuredly the reader will make his own this practical conclusion which will be the most beautiful fruit of devotion to the Sacred Heart: One needs “to have no other heart than that of God’s, no other spirit than His, no other will than His, no other affections than His, nor any other desires than His—in short, we must be completely His.”

—Dom B. Mackey, O.S.B.

THE GOAL OF PRAYER

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent, given on March 22, 1615, concerning the usefulness and necessity of prayer, the operations of the understanding, meditation, petitions, contemplation, and the goal of prayer.

St. Bernard—whose memory is dear to those who have to speak on prayer—in writing to a bishop, advised him that all that was necessary for him was to speak well (meaning to instruct, to discourse); then to do well in giving good example; and finally, to devote himself to prayer. And we, addressing this to all Christians, shall dwell upon the third point, which is prayer.

First, let us remark in passing that, although we condemn certain heretics of our time who hold that prayer is useless, we nevertheless do not hold with other heretics that it alone suffices for our justification. We say simply that it is so useful and necessary that without it we could not come to any good, seeing that by means of prayer we are shown how to perform all our actions well.

I have therefore consented to the desire which urges me to speak of prayer, even though it is not my intention to explain every aspect of it because we learn it more by experience than by being taught. Moreover, it matters little to know the kind of prayer. Actually, I would prefer that you never ask the name or the kind of prayer you are experiencing because, as St. Antony says, that prayer is imperfect in which one is aware that one is praying. Also,

prayer which one makes without knowing how one is doing it, and without reflecting on what one is asking for, shows clearly that such a soul is very much occupied with God and that, consequently, this prayer is excellent.

We shall treat, then, on the following four Sundays, of the final cause of prayer; of its efficient cause; of that which properly should not be called the "material cause," but rather the "object" of prayer; and of the effective cause of prayer itself. For now, I shall speak only of its final cause. But before entering upon the subject of prayer, I must say three or four little things that it is well to know.

Four operations pertain to our understanding: simple thought, study, meditation, and contemplation. Simple thought occurs when we go running over a great number of things, without any aim, as do flies that rest upon flowers, not seeking to extract any juice from them, but resting there only because they happen upon them. So it is with our understanding, passing from one thought to another. Even if these thoughts be of God, if they have no aim, far from being profitable, they are useless and detrimental and are a great obstacle to prayer.

Another operation of our understanding is study, and this takes place when we consider things only to know them, to understand them thoroughly or to be able to speak correctly of them, without having any other object than to fill our memory. In this we resemble beetles which settle upon the roses for no other end than to fill their stomachs and satiate themselves. Now, of these two operations of our understanding we shall speak no more, because they are not to our purpose.

Let us come to meditation. To know what meditation is, it is necessary to understand the words of King Hezekiah when the sentence of death was pronounced upon him, which was afterward revoked on account of his repentance. "I utter shrill cries," he said, "like a swallow," and "I moan like a dove,"¹ in the height of my sorrow. [Cf. *Is.* 38:14]. He meant to say: When the young swallow is all

alone and its mother has gone in search of the herb called "celandine" in order to help it recover its sight, it cries, it pips, since it does not feel its mother near and because it does not see at all. So I, having lost my mother, which is grace, and seeing no one come to my aid, "I utter shrill cries." But he adds, "I moan like a dove." We must know that all birds are accustomed to open their beaks when they sing or chirp, except the dove, who makes her little song or cooing sound whilst holding her breath—and it is through the movement up and down which she makes of it, without letting it escape, that she produces her song. In like manner, meditation is made when we fix our understanding on a mystery from which we mean to draw good affections, for if we did not have this intention it would no longer be meditation, but study. Meditation is made, then, to move the affections, and particularly that of love. Indeed, meditation is the mother of the love of God and contemplation is the daughter of the love of God.

But between meditation and contemplation there is the petition which is made when, after having considered the goodness of Our Lord, His infinite love, His omnipotence, we become confident enough to ask for and entreat Him to give us what we desire. Now there are three kinds of petition, each of which is made differently: The first is made by justice, the second is made by authority, and the third is made by grace.

The petition which is made by justice cannot be called "prayer," although we use this word, because in a petition of justice we ask for a thing which is due to us. A petition which is made by authority ought not be called "prayer" either; for as soon as someone who has great authority over us—such as a parent, a lord or a master—uses the word "please,"² we say immediately to him, "You can command," or "Your 'please' serves as my command." But true prayer is that which is made by grace, i.e., when we ask for something which is not due to us at all, and when we ask it of someone who is far superior to us, as God is.

The fourth operation of our understanding is contemplation, which is nothing other than taking delight in the goodness of Him whom we have learned to know in meditation and whom we have learned to love by means of this knowledge. This delight will be our happiness in Heaven above.

We must now speak of the final cause [that is, the goal] of prayer. We ought to know in the first place that all things have been created for prayer, and that when God created angels and men, He did so that they might praise Him eternally in Heaven above, even though this is the last thing that we shall do—if that can be called “last” which is eternal. To understand this better we will say this: When we wish to make something we always look first to the end [or purpose], rather than to the work itself. For example, if we are to build a church and we are asked why we are building it, we will respond that it is so that we can retire there and sing the praises of God; nevertheless, this will be the last thing that we shall do. Another example: If you enter the apartment of a prince, you will see there an aviary of several little birds which are in a brightly colored and highly embellished cage. And if you want to know the end for which they have been placed there, it is to give pleasure to their master. If you look into another place, you will see there sparrow hawks, falcons and such birds of prey which have been hooded; these latter are for catching the partridge and other birds to delicately nourish the prince. But God, who is in no way carnivorous, does not keep birds of prey, but only the little birds which are enclosed in the aviary and destined to please Him. These little birds represent monks and nuns who have voluntarily enclosed themselves in monasteries that they may chant the praises of their God. So their principal exercise ought to be prayer and obedience to that saying which Our Lord gives in the Gospel: “Pray always.” [*Lk.* 18:1].

The early Christians who had been trained by St. Mark the Evangelist were so assiduous in prayer that many of the

ancient Fathers called them “suppliants,” and others named them “physicians,” because by means of prayer they found the remedy for all their ills. They also named them “monks,” because they were so united; indeed, the name “monk” means “single.” Pagan philosophers said that man is an uprooted tree, from which we can conclude how necessary prayer is for man, since if a tree does not have sufficient earth to cover its roots it cannot live; neither can a man live who does not give special attention to heavenly things. Now prayer, according to most of the Fathers, is nothing other than a raising of the mind to heavenly things; others say that it is a petition; but the two opinions are not at all opposed, for while raising our mind to God, we can ask Him for what seems necessary.

The principal petition which we ought to make to God is that of union of our wills with His, and the final cause of prayer lies in desiring only God. Accordingly, all perfection is contained therein, as Brother Giles, the companion of St. Francis [of Assisi], said when a certain person asked him what he could do in order to be perfect very soon. “Give,” he replied, “one to One.” That is to say, you have only one soul, and there is only one God; give your soul to Him and He will give Himself to you. The final cause of prayer, then, ought not to be to desire those tendernesses and consolations which Our Lord sometimes gives, since union does not consist in that, but rather in conforming to the will of God.

NOTES

1. The old French for “I moan” is “mediteray,” which St. Francis de Sales is using as a pun for “meditate.”
2. Francis de Sales is capitalizing on the fact that in the French language “please,” “pray” and “prayer” are related.