

Sayings of St Francis de Sales

We must begin from within. 'Turn to me with your whole heart' is God's call. 'My son, give me your heart.' For the heart is the mainspring of our actions. So our Lord says: 'Set me a seal upon your heart and a seal upon your arm', for whoever truly has Jesus Christ in his heart will soon show it in all his outward actions.

Not long ago I saw a girl carrying a pail of water on her head, into the midst of which she put a piece of wood. I asked why she did that, and she answered that the wood steadied her pail, and prevented the water from being spilt. Even so, I said to myself, we must carry the Cross in the midst of our heart to hinder it from swaying to and fro, and from overflowing with the anxieties and disturbances of this restless life.

Love is the abridgement of all theology.

He who stays not in his littleness, loses his greatness.

We must never so form our opinions as not to be ready if necessary to give them up.

There was never an angry man that thought his anger unjust. Our words are a faithful index of the state of our souls.

Flies are attracted by a spoonful of honey more than by a whole barrel of vinegar.

Devotion is the pleasure of pleasures, the queen of virtues, and the perfection of charity. If charity be milk, devotion is the cream: if charity be a plant, devotion is its flower: if charity be a precious stone, devotion is its lustre: if charity be a rich balm, devotion is its odour, yea the odour of sweetness, which comforts men, and rejoices angels.

As the daylight increases, we see more clearly in the glass the spots and blemishes of our faces: even so as the inward light of the Holy Ghost more and more illuminates our consciences, we see more plainly and distinctly the sins, the inclinations, and imperfections which hinder us from attaining to true devotion; and the selfsame light which causes us to discover those spots and deformities enflames us likewise with desire to cleanse and purge us from them.

What do you think the bed of tribulation is? It is simply the school of humility.

Make sickness itself a prayer.

Look at the bees upon the thyme; they find there a very bitter juice but in sucking it they turn it into honey.

Try as much as you like but in the end only the language of the heart can reach another heart, while mere words as they slip from your tongue don't get past your listener's ear. Since, O my soul, thou art capable of God, woe to thee if thou contentest thyself with anything less than God.

Be patient with everyone, but above all with yourself I mean do not be disturbed because of your imperfections, and always rise up bravely from a fall.

Religious orders are not formed for the purpose of gathering together perfect people, but those who have the courage to aim at perfection.

Moderation is always good in all exercises, excepting that of loving God.

Provided that God is glorified we must not care by whom.

Nothing is as strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as strength.

Every Christian needs a half hour prayer each day, except when he is busy, then he needs an hour.

It is not necessary, in order to practise Christian graces, to be always dwelling consciously on each; such a process would confuse and hamper both your thoughts and feelings. Humility and love are the main links, to which all else is bound. Keep steady to these the highest and lowest for the whole building depends upon the foundation and the roof. If your heart is kept in the steadfast practice of these, you will not find other graces very difficult. They are the parents, and all other virtues follow them as little chickens follow their brooding mother.

Devotion is nothing else but that spiritual alertness and vivacity which enables us to cooperate with compassion promptly and wholeheartedly.

Compassion is to devotion what the fire is to the flame, for compassion is a spiritual fire, which is called devotion when it breaks into flame.

Sugar sweetens unripe fruit, and preserves from bitterness that which is ripe; devotion is, as it were, a spiritual sugar, which sweetens mortification and makes consolations harmless.

Never be in a hurry; do everything quietly and in a calm spirit. Do not lose your inward peace for anything whatsoever, even if your whole world seem upset.

Commend all to God, and then lie still and be at rest in his arms. Whatever happens, abide steadfast in the determination to cling simply to God, trusting to his eternal love for you; and if you find you have wandered from this shelter, recall your heart quietly and simply.

Prayer is the outflowing of the soul into her God and transcends the limits of the natural way.

Make a daily new beginning; there is no better means of progress in the spiritual life than to be continually beginning afresh, and never to think that we have done enough.

St Francis de Sales

1567—1622

His feast day is 24th January.

Francis de Sales was born in the Savoy district of France into a wealthy family with both political and social influence. His Father Francis de Nouvelles had aspirations for him to enter into the political arena, despite Francis' determination, from an early age to enter the Priesthood. At the age of nine Francis received the tonsure whilst studying at the College of Annecy and was ordained priest in 1593 against his Fathers wishes.

This period though was marked with many religious and political struggles; the whole of Europe was in flux as a consequence of the Reformation motivated by the teachings mainly of Martin Luther and John Calvin.

There is little known of the nine-year period between Francis' ordination and him becoming a Bishop. Apart from the one account that Francis whilst still early in his ministry was sent to the region of Chablais along the southern boarder of Lake Geneva, which was near his birthplace. This region was dominated by Calvinists and had been sent in an attempt to persuade the inhabitants to return to the Roman Catholic Church. Since he had been so successful he was appointed the Bishop of Geneva in 1602, a Calvinist strong hold, captured by the Catholic Duke of Savoy.

During his consecration as Bishop of Geneva, Francis had a religious experience, which set out before him the way for his ministry until his death.

In 1604 he met Jane de Chantal, a widow and mother of four. He described this experience to her and soon she became his 'spiritual friend' and later his 'spiritual companion': "God had taken me out of myself in order to take me to Himself and then He gave me back to the people. That is, He converted me from what I was for myself into what I was to be for them." She is known to us as St Jane de Chantal of Annecy. God took Francis out of himself in order to take him to Himself. In this action, Francis experienced the union of his humanity with the divine – God.

He taught about this union through preaching spiritual guidance, by teaching and by writing two books; *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God*.

He believed that the first and foremost means of union with God are prayer, both personal and liturgical, and compassion. This union with God for Francis resulted in a deep inner peace, which was manifested by a spirit of joyful optimism even in the midst of difficulty and challenge.

Francis, being a Bishop in the aftermath of the Council of Trent (1545-63), was responsible for the continued implementations of the decrees from the Council. He personally saw to the education of clergy and of the people in his Diocese, visiting every town, village and hamlet in the mountainous region.

Francis became Jane's spiritual guide and this inspired her to found the Order of the Visitation of Mary based on his

teachings of Prayer, and compassion, made up of the 'little virtues' of patience, humility, gentleness, and simplicity. Francis believed that we are called to lives of holiness and this holiness is to be lived, not in a grandiose way but by living your everyday lives with extraordinary compassion for others no matter who or what.

'Try interrupting the meditations of someone who is very attached to her spiritual exercises and you will see her upset, flustered, taken aback. A person who has true freedom will leave her prayer, unruffled, gracious toward the person who has unexpectedly disturbed her, for to her it's all the same—serving God by meditating or serving Him by responding to her neighbour. Both are the will of God, but helping the neighbour is necessary at that particular moment.'

We must see our neighbour in God who would have us show him compassion and consideration. Such is Paul's advice in Ephesians, where he instructs servants to obey God in their masters and their masters in God. We must put this compassion into practice by showing our neighbours visible signs of kindness. Even if it goes against the grain we should not give up because throughout goodwill and habit formed through constant repetition we will finally conquer our lower natures.

Francis placed the most emphasis on personal prayer because he believed that 'the history of the world and of salvation is therefore, a history of love.' He describes Creation as the 'first visitation of love', and the Incarnation as the 'second visitation of love'. So Francis' theology at its very simplest can be understood in terms of Creation and Incarnation.

'Remember that Our Lord saved us by suffering and endurance and that we also must work out our salvation by suffering, by bearing affliction, by enduring injuries, contradictions and discomforts, as peacefully as we can.'

St Francis de Sales' motto is; 'He who preaches with Love preaches effectively'.

He died in Lyon on 28th or 29th December 1622; was Canonised in 1665; and made a Doctor of the Church in 1877.

Andrew G Smith & the Revd Neil Broadbent

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