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# Francis de Sales and the Bases for Salesian Prayer

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The Gospel call to “pray always without becoming weary” (Luke 18:1) can be called the cornerstone of Francis de Sales’ spiritual edifice. Prayer “places our intellect in the brilliance of God’s light” and “exposes our will to the warmth of God’s heavenly love.” Prayer effectively purifies our thoughts and affections, Francis explains, because “it is a stream of holy water that flows forth and makes the plants of our good desires grow green and flourish and quenches the passions within our hearts.”<sup>119</sup> In this imaginative, clear and forthright manner, Francis shows us that prayer is not so much a matter of words but a way of living in constant relationship with God.

## *A spirituality that is open for everyone*

One of the most striking features of Francis de Sales’ teaching on prayer is summed up in his affirmation that “prayer is for everyone.” He proposes a spirituality of integration and not of separation. In effect, whoever lives in continual relationship with God does not need to abandon or neglect the reality of

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<sup>119</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, translated, with introduction and notes by John Kenneth Ryan; reprint, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 81 (part 2, chp 1).

life's demands. Engaging God is a call to engage life itself, at every level of one's existence and relationships.

Prayer "is so useful and necessary," Francis de Sales taught in one of his Lenten sermons in 1615, "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..." Yet the ability to pray is not something that can be explained easily. According to the bishop of Geneva, "we learn it more by experience than by being taught."<sup>120</sup>

In order to explain better the importance of prayer, Francis advances a series of questions. "Who can pray?" he asks. Reflecting on this question, Francis answers for us and asserts "God cannot pray," but creatures? Yes, creatures can, and people must pray! He then asks another question: "Let us see now if all people can pray." Francis responds a second time with an even stronger affirmation: "I say yes, and that no one can excuse himself from doing so, not even heretics."<sup>121</sup>

### *Conditions for prayer*

Francis comments that three elements are needed for true prayer. He calls these "the three necessary conditions," but he is not presenting us with methods or techniques. The factors (conditions) that allow for praying well are *virtues*—virtues that Francis would see as *dispositions* or as *ways of being*. The first condition is that of *humility*; the second virtue is that of *hope*;

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<sup>120</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Prayer*, edited by Lewis S. Fiorelli, translated by the Nuns of the Visitation [Frances Therese Leary], with a preface by Fr. M. Basil Pennington, and introduction by Canon Henry Benedict Mackey. Sermons of St. Francis de Sales, vol. 1 (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books, 1985), 1. [S. François de Sales, "Sermon pour le troisième dimanche de Carême, 22 mars 1615," in *OEA* 11:46-47.]

<sup>121</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Prayer*, 8 [S. François de Sales, "Sermon pour le quatrième dimanche de Carême, 29 mars 1615," in *OEA* 11:52].

the third condition to cultivate is *a loving attentiveness for Jesus Christ crucified*.<sup>122</sup>

### Humility and prayer

The first condition for fruitful prayer, according to Francis de Sales, is humility. He is not speaking in the abstract. Humility is an action, an intentional movement of the person who makes every effort “to be little by humility.” He explains this reality by using the image of a beggar who is not only poor but who shows his poverty to others to awaken a compassion that will deliver concrete assistance. Here is how he describes humility in prayer:

[Humility] is nothing other than that spiritual mendicancy of which Our Lord says: Blessed are the mendicant in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. And although some of the Doctors interpret these words thus: how happy are the poor in spirit, the two interpretations are not opposed, because all the poor are mendicants [beggars] if they are not proud, and all mendicants are poor if they are not avaricious. In order to pray well, then, we must acknowledge that we are poor, and that we must greatly humble ourselves; for do you not see how a marksman with a crossbow, when he wishes to discharge a large arrow, draws the string of his bow lower the higher he wants it to go? Thus must we do when we wish our prayer to reach Heaven; we must lower ourselves by the awareness of our nothingness. David admonishes us to do so by these words: When you wish to pray, plunge yourselves profoundly into the abyss of your nothingness that you may be able afterward, without difficulty, to let your prayer fly like an arrow even up to the heavens.

Do you not see that nobles who wish to make water rise to the top of their castles go to the source of this water in some highly elevated place and then convey it by pipes, forcing it to descend for as great a distance as they wish it to rise? Otherwise the water would never rise. And if you ask them how they made it rise, they will answer you that it rises through this descent. In the same with prayer; for if you ask how

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<sup>122</sup> Cf. St. Francis de Sales, “Sermon pour le quatrième dimanche de Carême, 29 mars 1615,” in *OEA* 11:53.

it is that prayer can rise to Heaven, you will be told that it rises there through the descent of humility.<sup>123</sup>

### Prayer and Hope

The second necessary condition for prayer, according to Francis de Sales, is that disposition which allows us to “make ourselves great in hope.”<sup>124</sup> To illustrate the importance of exercising the virtue of hope to deepen our prayer life, Francis uses an interesting image which he takes from the *Song of Songs*. He paraphrases the third chapter where the sacred author describes the arrival of the Bridegroom, beginning with his first appearance with his retinue on the distant horizon. From feelings of longing and uncertainty, the Bride is heartened at the appearance of a wedding party “coming up from the desert, like a column of smoke laden with myrrh, with frankincense, and with the perfume of every exotic dust.”<sup>125</sup> Remote though the Bridegroom still is from the Bride, the sight of the beloved journeying across the vast expanse of the desert heightens the sense of expectation and excites great joy in the hearts of those who await the beloved’s arrival. These are the ingredients that are necessary for whoever wants to pray:

The spouse coming up from the desert rises like a shoot or column of smoke, laden with myrrh. This represents hope, for even though myrrh gives off a pleasant odor, it is nevertheless bitter to the taste. Likewise, hope is pleasant since it promises that we shall one day possess what we long for, but it is bitter because we are not now enjoying what we love.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Prayer*, 9-10 [“Sermon pour le quatrième dimanche de Carême, 29 mars 1615,” in *OEA* 11:53-54].

<sup>124</sup> S. François de Sales, “Sermon 29 mars 1615,” in *OEA* 9:53.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. *Song* 3:6-11.

<sup>126</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Prayer*, 10. [*OEA* 11:54.]

The *Song of Songs* is one of Francis de Sales' favorite scriptural sources, and he often draws his imagery from this biblical source when giving sermons and conferences. As often happens, however, he is never quite totally satisfied with one image. Once he has set the stage, he often switches criteria and so must redesign the scenery. He does the same here when trying to describe the spirit of prayer. *Hope is the essential element*, but hope only can become fruitful in the context of prayer if it is grounded in love.

Incense is far more appropriate as the symbol of hope, because, being placed upon fire, it always sends its smoke upward; likewise, it is necessary that hope be placed upon charity, otherwise it would no longer be hope, but rather presumption. Hope, like an arrow, darts up even to the gate of Heaven, but it cannot enter there because it is a virtue wholly of earth. If we want our prayer to penetrate Heaven, we must whet the arrow with the grindstone of charity.<sup>127</sup>

### **Loving attentiveness to Jesus as an essential element of prayer**

Love-grounded hope is necessarily relational. It is the third necessary condition for praying well: that one be grafted on to the sacred olive tree (Rom 11:23), Jesus the Savior–Christ Crucified.

The angels say that the spouse is leaning upon her Lover; we have seen that for the last condition it is necessary to be grafted onto Jesus Christ crucified. The [Divine] Spouse praised His spouse, saying that she was like a lily among thorns. She, in turn, answered Him: My Lover is like an apple tree among the trees of the woods; this tree is completely laden with leaves, flowers and fruit; I shall rest in its shadow and receive the fruit which falls into my lap and eat it, and having chewed it, I shall relish it in my mouth, where I shall find it sweet and agreeable. [Cf. Song 2:2-3]. But where is this tree planted? In what woods will we find it? Without doubt it is planted on Mount Calvary,

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<sup>127</sup>St. Francis de Sales, *The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Prayer*, 10-11.

and we must keep ourselves in its shadow. But what are its leaves? They are nothing other than the hope that we have of our salvation by means of the death of the Savior. And its flowers? They are the prayers that He offered up to His Father for us [Cf. Heb 5:7]; the fruits are the merits of His Passion and Death.<sup>128</sup>

### *Guide to prayer*

When Francis de Sales sets out to teach the faithful how to pray, he urges his listeners to begin with a practical attitude and to take concrete steps forward. “Place yourself in the presence of God,” he says, indicating the first step; for the second step he recommends that they should “invoke his assistance.”<sup>129</sup>

These simple words are sometimes taken to be too naïve or simplistic. “If God is everywhere, how can I *not* be myself in God’s presence?” some have asked. The point that Francis de Sales is trying to make is that, while we always stand before God, we often ignore the Divine presence, are oblivious to God’s saving plan for us, and insensitive to his sovereign power in our lives. To begin to pray, therefore, we must make ourselves aware that we stand in the presence of the almighty, all-saving and most sovereign God. We need to be totally attentive to God.

Does this sound like an *intellectual* procedure? It may be. Francis de Sales will always maintain that prayer, especially mental prayer, involves *intellect*. However, prayer is not a thing for the head alone. Francis de Sales understood prayer to be more radical:

Since prayer places our intellect in the brilliance of God’s light and exposes our will to the warmth of his heavenly love, nothing else so effectively purifies our intellect of ignorance and our will of depraved affections. It is a stream of holy water that flows forth and makes the

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>129</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 84 (part 2, chp 2).

plants of our good desires grow green and flourish and quenches the passions within our hearts.<sup>130</sup>

When Francis de Sales begins to speak of prayer, he immediately qualifies it as essentially “mental prayer,” or “prayer of the heart.” It is *this* kind of prayer that he recommends above all others: *surtout je vous conseille la mentale et cordiale*.<sup>131</sup> The phrase is difficult to translate on at least two counts. In English we have, perhaps in the past, used the term *mental prayer* to designate *contemplative prayer* or *meditation*.<sup>132</sup> Yet Francis couples the adjective *cordial* with that of *mental*, so that he links *mental prayer* (a known category for many of us) with *cordial prayer* (by which he wants to designate heartfelt prayer or, better, *prayer of the heart*). By making this connection, Francis de Sales enriches our understanding of *mental prayer* as something that takes us beyond the confines of disciplined *meditation* as an analytical activity of the mind to something more relational: a matter of the heart and will.

Our difficulty in English lies not only with the adjectives (*mental* and *cordial*), but with the noun (*prayer*) as well. Francis de Sales does not choose a single noun when speaking of prayer, and his word choice offers different nuances than what we might understand simply from our expression of this reality in English. At times he uses the word *prière*, but he seems to prefer to speak of *oraison*. The first term that he uses is the French word *prière*, which comes from the Latin word *præcari* (to *beg* or to *beseech*). In all of his writings it seems that Francis chooses this word 56 times. Instead, the term that our Savoyard bishop seems

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.81 (part 2, chp 1).

<sup>131</sup> S. François de Sales, *Introduction à la vie dévote*, part 2, chp 1 [OEA 3:70].

<sup>132</sup> Cf. “Mental Prayer,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, edited by Michael Downey; A Michael Glazier Book (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 653.

to prefer is *oraison/orayson*, which comes from the Latin word *orare* (to speak). Francis makes use of this term 125 times.<sup>133</sup>

When Francis launches his discussion of *prayer*, he makes use of the word *oraison*, a term that derives from the Latin *oratio*, which includes the concepts of *speech*, *discourse* and *prayer*. Interestingly, Francis uses this *oraison* to encourage both the practice of mental prayer (*la mentale et cordiale*) and vocal prayer (*oraison vocale*).<sup>134</sup> This points to a significant element. For Francis de Sales, prayer is always a type of *discourse*, and it can take place in both a private and public manner: interiorly and externally; mentally and vocally.

Even so, as Francis de Sales recommends the practice of *mental* and *vocal prayer*, he seems less concerned about terminology than with the desire to take up completely with God.<sup>135</sup>

Again the English does not help us much, but if we look at how the saint describes *mental prayer*, we see that he considered praying to be more than an intellectual exercise. It is a conversation that comes from the heart - an affective and attentive dialogue. In his own words:

I especially counsel you to practice mental prayer, the prayer of the heart, and particularly that which centers on the life and passion of our Lord. By often turning your eyes on him in meditation, your whole soul will be filled with him. You will learn his ways and form your actions after the pattern of his. He is "the light of the world," and therefore it is in him and by him and for him that we must be

<sup>133</sup> Cf. Arnaldo Pedrini, "La Preghiera secondo il pensiero di s. Francesco di Sales," in *Rivista di vita spirituale* 40 (1986): 157; « Table analytique, » in *OEA* 27:72-73, 80.

<sup>134</sup> S. François de Sales, *Introduction à la vie dévote*, part 2, chp 1 [*OEA* 3:71].

<sup>135</sup> Cf. St. Francis de Sales, "The Goal of Prayer," Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent, March 22, 1615, in *The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Prayer*, edited by Lewis S. Fiorelli, translated by the Nuns of the Visitation (Rockford, IL: TAN, 1985), 1-2 [*OEA* 9:47].

instructed and enlightened. He is the tree of desire in whose shade we must be refreshed. He is that living “fountain of Jacob” in which we can wash ourselves clean of all our stains. Finally, just as little children learn to speak by listening to their mothers and lisping words after them, so also by keeping close to our Savior in meditation and observing his words, actions, and affections we learn by his grace to speak, act, and will like him.<sup>136</sup>

The final image is extremely interesting, but the entire passage points to prayer that is relational and vital. As the saint teaches, *oraison* is mainly a matter of the “heart” and the “will.” If prayer prompts a conversation, a dialogue with God, it also shapes the one who prays in a closer relationship with the Almighty.

True prayer, in Salesian tradition, is practical. It relates to the real-life situation of real-live people. This kind of prayer, born in the reality of daily life, is natural, gentle, and it flows easily. The more one learns to pray from real life, the more one’s prayer is grounded. The only way to learn to pray in this manner is to start!

### *Jesus looks for us where we are*

In so many words and images, Francis de Sales demonstrates that prayer is essentially a matter of relationships. Humility, loving hope, and “being grafted onto Christ crucified” are all relational virtues. He speaks, then, not of technique, but of attachment.

Although God takes the first step and initiates the relationship, Francis demonstrates that every relationship involves reciprocity. Just as the Beloved longs for *the one whom my heart loves* and seeks to attach herself to the Divine Spouse, so Jesus looks for the Beloved. The images come from the *Song of Songs*, but also from that Johannine sense of Jesus taking the

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<sup>136</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 81 (part 2, chp 1).

initiative to save humanity.<sup>137</sup> To understand the dynamic, one must be steeped in prayer, says the bishop of Geneva. But what does this mean?

We do not use the word “prayer” solely for petition or “demand for some good, poured out by the faithful before God,” as St. Basil calls it. We use the term as St. Bonaventure does when he says that prayer, generally speaking, comprehends all the acts of contemplation; or like St. Gregory of Nyssa, who teaches that a “prayer is a conference or conversation of the soul with God,” or again like St. John Chrysostom, who asserts that “prayer is discussion with the divine majesty,” or finally like St. Augustine and St. John Damascene, who say that “prayer is an ascent or elevation of the mind to God.” If prayer is a colloquy, a discussion, or a conversation of the soul with God, then by prayer we speak to God and God in turn speaks to us. We aspire to him and breathe in him; he reciprocally inspires us and breathes upon us.

What do we discuss in prayer? What is the subject of our conference? Theotimus, in prayer we speak only of God. Whom can love discuss and speak of except the beloved? Hence, prayer and mystical theology are the same thing. It is called theology because just as speculative theology has God as its object, so also prayer speaks only of God.<sup>138</sup>

### *Simplicity and intensity in prayer*

For Francis de Sales, prayer is both simple and complex. It takes effort to pray well, and it presupposes a certain amount of structure. Furthermore, it demands time, but more than a technique, requires a “personal investment” on the part of the person who wants to enter into prayer. It is simple because it begins with *the little virtues*, and one begins to pray out of humility and simplicity; it is complex because these *little virtues* are not easy to practice.

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<sup>137</sup> Cf. John 15:16: *It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.*

<sup>138</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, 1:268-269 (bk 6, chp 1) [OEA 4:303].

When he speaks of *simple* prayer, Francis de Sales describes it as an *impulse*, or as the *every-day efforts to join* God, to respond to God's goodness.

Again, Francis de Sales' use of images here is striking. *Joining* is not the same as *squeezing* things together, or *pressing* one upon another. Often, all that is necessary is that we place one thing next to another, and nature takes over: vines weave themselves into elm trees and jasmine winds itself through the garden trellises. The gardener does not have to clasp and press the vine to the tree; in growing, the vine does this naturally until it actually begins to penetrate the bark of the tree and the two become inseparable.<sup>139</sup>

Another image Francis de Sales offers is that of an infant nursing at her mother's breast. The child learns to press herself more tightly to her mother so as to draw more nourishment, while the loving mother draws the child to herself and so helps the baby whose own feeble efforts would not be sufficient to the task. So it is with prayer: God draws the soul to nurse, and the soul uses all her might to respond.<sup>140</sup>

In prayer this union is often made by means of little but frequent flights and advances of the soul towards God. If you watch a little infant joined and united to its mother's breast, you will see that from time to time it presses on and clasps her closer with little movements aroused by the pleasure it takes in drinking in her milk. So too the heart united to God in prayer often makes certain renewals of its union by movements in which it presses and joins itself more closely to the divine sweetness.<sup>141</sup>

True simplicity brings deep intensity. For Francis de Sales, prayer is not a complicated notion, but a question of relationships. The believer centers on God, which is to say he seeks nourishment and nurturing. The starting point is to place

<sup>139</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* 2:14 (bk 7, chp 1) [*OEA* 5:5-6].

<sup>140</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* 2:14-15 (bk 7, chp 1) [*OEA* 5:6-7].

<sup>141</sup> *St. Ibid.* 2:15 (bk 7, chp 1) [*OEA* 5:7-8].

oneself in God's presence, which is to say that the believer takes the simple step of approaching God: to come to God's side, and to at least touch God as the ivy touches the tree. In time, as the ivy and the tree will grow together, the believer's life intertwines with God. This type of prayer does not demand contortions: it is a matter of welcoming God's presence and growing in it.

### *Divine Intimacy*

Intimacy with God is what others would speak of as *union with God*. Jean-Pierre Camus, bishop of the neighboring diocese of Belley from 1609 to 1629, illustrated how he had learned this point from his spiritual guide and father, Francis de Sales.

Unity and simplicity, the bishop of Geneva taught him, form the goal of prayer, especially in meditative prayer. The saint provided the following illustration: "the bees make less honey amid the abundance of early spring flowers than later on, because they delight to roam about amid the general abundance, and do not pause long enough to gather the precious fruits with which they fill their comb."<sup>142</sup> To arrive at union, one must keep prayer simple, to the point, unassuming. After all, the saint pointed out, "drones make plenty of noise, and do no work."<sup>143</sup>

Simplicity presupposes patience and repetition. Again, we go to Jean-Pierre Camus' testimony. This is what he learned about prayer from Francis de Sales:

In answer to the question, whether it is well often to repeat the same affection and resolution, with a view to its confirmation, the Bishop said that we ought to imitate painters and sculptors, who produce their works by dint of many a stroke of the pencil or chisel: if we would form a deep impression in our hearts, we must repeat the same thing many a time. He added, that just as in swimming, those who strike out

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<sup>142</sup> Jean-Pierre Camus, *The Spirit of S. Francis de Sales, Bishop and Prince of Geneva*, translated by Henrietta Louise Farrer Lear. New impression ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1921), 12-13.

<sup>143</sup> 13.

wildly are in danger of sinking, because calm, quiet movements are necessary to maintain one's balance, so in prayer, those who are eager or excited get entangled amid their imaginations, and injure themselves thereby.<sup>144</sup>

Those who are steadfast in prayer are *absorbed in God* and not self-absorbed. In other words, those who pray deeply do not even realize that they are praying, for their attention is totally directed toward God. The Salesian formula again stresses simplicity as the key to continued prayer. The Gospel story where Jesus places a child in the midst of the disciples (Mt 18:1-4) is a passage that is best suited to illustrate this point:

Our Lord set a little child before us as the type of perfection. Now a child takes no thought for anything so long as it is in the presence of its parents; it clings to them, without investigating their kindness or their gifts, which it accepts trustfully, and enjoys in all simplicity, without any curiosity as to their cause or effect, love taking the place of all beside in its little mind. So he whose sole object is to please his Heavenly Lover, has neither time nor inclination for self-contemplation, but he always follows wither he is led by love.<sup>145</sup>

This is where *mysticism* comes in for Francis de Sales. Prayer (being absorbed in God) can be meditative (being attentive), but this is only a starting point. When it becomes a conversation that takes place "in secret," then it becomes mystical. "Prayer is called mystical," Francis de Sales teaches, "because its conversation is altogether secret. In it nothing is spoken between God and the soul except from heart to heart, by a communication incommunicable to any others but those who make it."<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> 13.

<sup>145</sup> 13-14.

<sup>146</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, 1:269 (bk 6, chp 1) [OEA 4:339-340]; cf. 1:271ff.

*Ecstasy of action*

Francis de Sales portrays *contemplation* as a *loving attentiveness* that, far from suspending one's faculties, thrusts the person who prays into the midst of the day, allowing him or her to share joy, being sensitive to others and ready to serve those in need. Thus prayer extends to relationships because it prompts concern for others.

When speaking of prayer, Francis uses arguments and structures that are more medieval than modern. Even so, he takes us in a new direction. To begin with, Francis de Sales recognizes that knowledge builds on *experience*. If this is so, then prayer also must be seen in the context of experience, in the sense that the way to gauge the value and significance of prayer is through the resulting action or activity. It is wonderful to have "good thoughts" in the course of an hour of meditation, but these good thoughts are quite fruitless unless the believer is moved to make a *good resolution* at the conclusion of that prayer. Good resolutions, in turn, must translate into concrete actions: they must take shape *this very day* in a *tangible form of charity*.

Contemplative prayer must be practical and practicable. This is the crux of the matter for Francis. Therefore he teaches us that to be prayerful we must nurture a relationship with God, and this can only be verified as true by the quality of relationships with the people with whom we live and work day-by-day. In this sense, prayer (the call to charity) must transform our lives; if our prayer is authentic, it will transform our hearts.

Prayer takes place in stages, both because it is necessary to grow in prayer, and secondly because there are distinct moments in prayer, particularly in "mental prayer." Meditation *awakens* the soul to God; contemplation allows *love to dwell* with the believer. Meditation is the *labor*, the *sowing*; contemplation is *the reaping*, the *rejoicing* at the abundant harvest.

Contemplation always has this special quality, that it is made with delight. It presupposes that we have found God and his holy love and that we find joy and delight in him, for we say, "I found him whom my soul loves: I have found him, and I will not let him go." In this it differs from meditation, which almost always is made with difficulty, labor, and reasoning. In meditation our mind passes from consideration to consideration and searches in many places either for the beloved of its love or for the love of its beloved. Jacob labors in meditation to obtain Rachel, but in contemplation he rejoices with her and forgets all his labor.<sup>147</sup>

Having said this, Francis never wanted Philothea or Theotimus to obsess over prayer. There will be days when prayer will seem quite difficult. This is no reason to become worried or discouraged. If after making every effort in prayer there is no sense of joy or comfort, Francis tells Philothea, "do not be disturbed, no matter how great the dryness may be, but continue to keep a devout posture before God."<sup>148</sup> To get worked up about the lack of progress is a sign of presumption. Are we thirsty for Holiness, or driven by Pride? The ecstasy of action is linked with simplicity of life, and prayer brings us full circle.

### *Conclusion: prayer as communion and union*

When Francis teaches a method of prayer, his whole point is to prepare people to reach the goal of Christian discipleship. Therefore, even when he speaks of *methods in prayer*, his emphasis is not on the technique but on the goal – and that goal is *Union with God*. In fact, for Francis de Sales it is impossible to understand Christian Life without reference to *communion with God*.

Union with God is intimate and profound. Francis highlights his belief in its essentiality with numerous images,

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. 1:284 (bk 6, chp 6) [OEA 4:323-324].

<sup>148</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 93 (part 2, chp 9) [OEA 3:86-87].

above all with the image of the heart. He describes prayer as an intimate dialogue: a heart to heart conversation. And what are the elements of this conversation if not intimacy, union, communion, accessibility, approachability, familiarity and simplicity? The heart-to-heart dialogue of prayer becomes transformational in the day-to-day effort to bridge gaps. It is a conversation that takes place in the context of experience, in a way that deepens ever more the relationship between God and the person who prays and who “is thirsting for God, the living God” (Psalm 42:3).