Salesian Simplicity: How a “Little Virtue” Can Go a Long Way

Four hundred years ago, simplicity was retrieved by two saints and given a new form.¹ In June 1610, Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal established the religious order of the Visitation of Holy Mary in Annecy, France. Begun with three nuns who would spend their day in prayer and occasionally visit the poor and sick in town—a radically new apostolic twist at the time—the order now has numerous monasteries throughout the world and includes those sisters who took up residence in the “Mater Ecclesiae” monastery in the Vatican in 2009. The superior there succinctly describes the particular charism of this religious order in terms that match the focus of the conference at which this paper was originally presented: “The spirit of the Visitation is one of profound humility toward God, and great meekness toward the neighbor—a spirit that does not put the accent on exterior austerity. The sisters must supply it with interior renunciation and with a great simplicity and joy in the common life.”²

That spirit of simplicity aligns directly with Francis de Sales’s vision of the virtuous Christian life and takes a distinct form within the contemplative life of the Visitation order. And, as we will suggest, this four-hundred-year-old tradition remains especially relevant for the pursuit of holiness in the hectic world of the twenty-first century.

Simplicity as a Virtue in Salesian Spirituality

For St. Francis de Sales, simplicity paves the way to holiness. In his classic book on that subject—an *Introduction to the Devout Life*—this Doctor of the Church posited the then revolutionary idea that holiness is possible for everyone, not just the professionally religious monks and nuns, and that this holiness is realized in and through one’s vocation or state in life. In his view, what makes the possible actual is the life of virtue.

Seeking to forge a middle ground for religious devotion between the supereminent tendencies of spiritual mysticism and the austere practices of ascetical discipline, he champions the exercise of “little virtues”—those virtues that are able to be practiced in an ordinary way amid everyday relationships. He explains that “We do not very often come across opportunities for exercising” magnificent feats of virtue (like courageously saving someone from a burning building), but little ones—like gentleness, modesty, and humility—are continually

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called for as “graces which ought to color everything we do.” Thus, he encourages the practice of “the best virtues, not those which are most highly esteemed; the most excellent, not the most visible; the truest, not the most conspicuous.”³

Concerning simplicity, which he names most often in the various lists of the “little virtues” that appear throughout his writings, de Sales suggests any number of ways in which this can be carried out in one’s daily comportment. For example, in terms of fashion, simplicity shows itself in the propriety of one’s clothing. Adding wit to his wisdom, he writes, “Old people are always ridiculous when they try to make themselves pretty. Such folly can be put up with only in youth.”⁴ Or, in terms of language, simplicity calls forth words that are both frank and honest, while it challenges us to hold our tongue when called upon to speak about ourselves; as the saint explains,

> Without doubt, whoever speaks little of himself does so extremely well; for, whether it be that we speak in machining ourselves or in excusing ourselves, in praising ourselves or in despising ourselves, it will always happen that our speech serves to entice us to vanity. If, therefore, some great charity draws us to speak of ourselves and our relatives, we must hold our tongue about it.⁵

Even more so, simplicity in speech is opposed to any sort of equivocation; in Francis’s view nothing so out-rages truth as duplicity, “For those who attempt to shield truth by artifice actually kill and suffocate it.”⁶

Finally, in terms of relationships, where, according to Wendy Wright, Francis gives to simplicity its particular nuance, to be simple means to act without cunning or guile.⁷ It enables us to avoid prosaic illusions, those illusions of grandeur which in reality are nothing more than mental temptations:

> There are souls that make great plans to do excellent services for Our Savior, by eminent actions and extraordinary sufferings—but actions and sufferings which there is no opportunity to carry out and perhaps never will be. Based on this, these souls think they have done some great thing in love; in this they are very often deceived, for while they embrace in desire what seems to them to be great future crosses, they anxiously avoid the burden of lesser ones that are present. Is it not an extreme temptation to be so valiant in imagination, and so cowardly in execution?⁸

Instead of being so deceived, devout persons seek simply to serve God, even if they do not experience contentment in doing so:

> It is necessary to consider that there is no vocation that does not have its trouble, its bitterness and its distaste; and, what is more, if this is so among those not fully resigned to the will of God, each would wish voluntarily to change his condition to some other. . . . From where comes this general inquietude of spirit if not from a certain displeasure that we have about what is contrary, and a malignity of spirit that makes us think that another is better than we are? But it is all the same: whoever is not fully resigned, who turns this way and that, he will never have rest. . . . A person who no longer has the restlessness of his own will is content with everything: provided that God be served, it does not matter in what manner God employs him: provided that he does his divine will, it is all the same to him.⁹
To use a modern term, what unites these various aspects and exercises of simplicity is the notion that this virtue entails being “transparent.” As Wendy Wright describes it, in living a simple life

[all] the ornament and artifice on the outside is peeled away; all the complicated criss-crosses of self-reflection and multiple considerations on the inside are also gently relinquished and given second place. . . . And that transparency then is a window through which God and the deepest center of the person can come together. Nothing remains between God and person.10

But the transparency of a virtuous life that is unadorned and unpretentious does not render simplicity a simple thing! On the contrary, this “little” virtue, when lived to its fullest, encompasses the whole of life in its adherence to the will of God in all things. In other words, it entails a perfect correspondence between who we are and how we act. That is the way of life sought by the Visitation sisters, for whom simplicity is constitutive of their particular charism in the church and for the world.11

Simplicity as Sanctity in the Visitation Order

For the Visitation sisters, the Salesian understanding of simplicity as a virtue extends beyond the practices of everyday life to encompass the totality of their existence. Simplicity, in this sense, is an attitude of being more than an attribute of action. Cultivating this attitude is the direction that Francis de Sales sets for the spiritual life of Jane de Chantal and for the religious order she would lead.

From his first encounter with her in Dijon,12 Francis emphasized the need for Jane to develop a more simple life. As the amusing story is told, he took the opportunity at one of their first encounters to indicate blithely that her manner of dress should reflect her state in life as a widow:

One day that Madame de Chantal had come to dine, she appeared a bit more dressed up and decked out than she ordinarily did. “Madame,” said the bishop, “do you have plans to remarry?” “Oh, no, Monsignor,” she replied quickly. “Well then,” replied the saint, “it should be necessary to take down the flag.”13

But more important would be Jane’s interior focus; over the course of several years, his spiritual direction led her to simplify her entire life. That process of simplification—which Wendy Wright describes as St. Jane’s own “call within a call”14—would also come to characterize the entire religious order that she established with him.

Rooted in the twin Salesian virtues of humility and gentleness, the foundation of the Visitation order had only a simple aim, which Francis de Sales explains in a letter to the cardinal archbishop of Lyon, who objected to the sisters’ practice of leaving the monastery to visit the sick. Francis writes that the purpose of this new group of nuns

is to give to God daughters of prayer and souls so interior that they be found worthy of serving his infinite Majesty and of adoring him in spirit and in truth. Leaving the grand orders already established in the church to honor Our Lord by excellent exercises and brilliant virtues, I wish that my daughters would have no other intention than to glorify him by their abasement; that this little Institute of the Visitation be like a poor dove among innocent doves, whose care and concern is to meditate upon the law of the Lord without making themselves seen or understood by the world; that they dwell hidden in the cleft of the rock and in the secret of the recesses in order there to give to their Beloved, by their living and dying,
some proofs of the grief and the love of their hearts, expressed by their lowly and humble groaning.\textsuperscript{15} That “hiddenness” of their life discloses their singularity of purpose. It also gives rise to a distinguishing feature of this new order, namely, the practice of admitting as sisters women who, through age or infirmity or widowhood, were too frail to undertake the penitential austerities of other contemplative orders. Instead, the Visitation sisters would practice an interior discipline, one cultivated through the progressive development of personal simplicity amid a joyful common life.\textsuperscript{16}

The way by which the sisters would grow in simplicity is mapped out for them most clearly in the *Spiritual Conferences*—a compilation of informal question-and-answer sessions conducted in the courtyard or parlor of the monastery, in which the bishop clarified the distinctive way of life for the members of his new institute. Notwithstanding the limitations of the literary form or the reliability of the published versions,\textsuperscript{17} these conferences do reveal the mindset of St. Francis de Sales, for whom simplicity is nothing less than the pursuit of perfection.

That pursuit begins with the realization of what exactly this virtue is. The holy bishop tells the sisters, “Simplicity is nothing other than an act of pure and simple charity that has only one goal, which is to acquire the love of God. Our spirit is simple when we have no other aim in all that we do or want.”\textsuperscript{18} Then he indicates to them, by way of the biblical story of Martha and Mary, that simplicity and charity are inseparably linked, such that the “act of simple charity allows us to look at and have no other goal in sight in all our actions.”\textsuperscript{19} And this, he claims, is a distinctively Christian virtue.

He then explains that the sisters’ singularity of focus through simplicity\textsuperscript{20} will facilitate their pursuit of holiness by freeing them from the torment of spiritual restlessness and inquietude. Born from the humility that recognizes the inevitable imperfection inherent to human nature, simplicity runs counter to any interior agitation, as the saint explains elsewhere:

> You know that God wishes, in general, that one serve him, by loving him above all things and our neighbor as ourselves. . . . That said, it is necessary to do so in good faith, without finesse or subtlety, which would be in the manner of this world, where perfection does not reside, in a human way and according to this time, while waiting to do so in the divine and angelic world and according to eternity. Neither pressure nor agitation of purpose serve any good; desire is good, but let it be without agitation. It is this pressure from which I [wish to] shield you, as the mother imperfection of all imperfections.\textsuperscript{21}

In more positive terms, simplicity is the corollary of that liberty of spirit that comes from love. Speaking again to the sisters, he claims that

> Simplicity banishes from the human spirit both the need and the anxiety that many develop, so they say, as they search for the ability to love God by the sheer number of exercises and other means. It seems to them that if they do everything that the Saints have done, they will most certainly be satisfied. What poor people! They are to be pitied! They torment themselves to find the art of loving God. They don’t know that there is none except to love Him. They think that there is a certain ingenuity to acquire this love which is truly found only in simplicity.\textsuperscript{22}
Ultimately, the sisters’ simple love for God can and should integrate all the aspects of their life. In other conferences, their founder explains how related virtues can help them to practice this simplicity. Through humility they learn to embrace the mortifications and abjections of everyday life, for, in his words, “our misery is the throne of God’s mercy.” Through wonder about their imperfections in contrast to the divine goodness exercised in their regard, they are invited to place their confidence entirely in God. Through the joy this contemplation brings, they are called to exercise holy indifference in all matters; on this point the saint concludes his final conference with this farewell: “I say, therefore, that it is necessary to ask for nothing and refuse nothing, but to be left in the arms of divine Providence, without bemusing ourselves about any desire, except to will what God wills of us. . . . All our perfection consists in the practice of this point.”

To summarize the teaching of the *Spiritual Conferences*, consider this image that Francis de Sales gives to the sisters:

A child while she is young is in a state of such simplicity that she has no knowledge of anyone except her mother. She has only one love, which is for her mother, and in this love there is only one goal, which is her bosom. She wants nothing else. The Christian who enjoys perfect simplicity has only one love, only one goal, which is to rest on our heavenly Father’s bosom and, once there, to be a loving child, resting there and leaving every care of self to her good Father, without ever troubling [herself] about anything, except to dwell in this holy confidence.

Imagined thus, the cultivation of perfect simplicity remains the particular charism of the Visitation sisters and distinguishes their monastic life from that of people living in the world. While the former “must place all their cares in the hands of God . . . leaving themselves totally in the arms of divine Providence,” the latter must exercise another virtue. As the bishop notes, they must practice prudence in order to increase their means. They have a great concern about supporting their families, otherwise they would not fulfill their responsibilities. Even though they ought to depend more on Divine Providence than on their own strength, so they must not neglect thinking about their affairs.

Thus, the question remains: how do we retrieve simplicity from the four-hundred-year-old tradition of the Visitation in order to foster a life of virtue among those living in today’s world?

**Retrieving Salesian Simplicity for Today’s World**

In our contemporary culture, marked as it is by the notion that spirituality is separate from, or an addition to, the myriad cares and concerns of everyday life, the Salesian tradition of the devout life as a universal call to holiness, and the practice of virtue that attends it, holds great promise even for those who do not have the luxury of freedom from worldly pursuits. From this tradition, we can retrieve the simple life today through that humility and wonder and joy by which we learn to “be real.”

To be real is, first of all, to accept the fact of our human condition. It is to “be who we are” in the humble realization that we are not perfect. It recognizes that our progress in virtue is neither rapid nor permanent. To be who we are is simply to acknowledge our sinful nature. St. Francis de Sales gently notes, we are sometimes so busy being good angels that we neglect to be good men and women. Our imper-
Infections are going to accompany us to the grave. We can't go anywhere without having our feet on the ground, yet we don't just lie there, sprawled [in the dust]. On the other hand, we mustn't think we can fly, for we are like little chicks who don't have wings yet. We die little by little; so our imperfections must die with us, a little each day.  

In the second place, to be real is to accept the truth of our personal character. It is to “be what we are” in grateful wonder at having been created at all. It recognizes that our time and energy are wasted in dreaming of another life here below where the proverbial grass may be greener. To be what we are is simply to welcome the life we have been given. St. Francis de Sales humorously says,  

Let us be what we are and be that well, in order to bring honor to the Master Craftsman, whose handiwork we are. People laughed at the painter who, intending to paint a horse, came up with a perfect bull; the work was handsome in itself, but not much credit to the artist who had other plans and succeeded in this one only by chance. Let us be what God wants us to be, provided we are His, and let us not be what we would like to be, contrary to His intention. Even if we were the most perfect creatures under heaven, what good would that do us if we were not as God’s will would have us be?  

Finally, to be real is to accept the far-ranging vicissitudes of this life as coming from the hand of God. It is to “be where we are” in the joyful awareness that whatever is happening in our lives (or not), this is where God is pleased to have us be. It recognizes that the present moment is the only time within our control. To be where we are is simply to embrace all that occurs each day. St. Francis de Sales wisely suggests,  

Let us be firmly resolved to serve God with our whole heart and life. Beyond that, let us have no care about tomorrow. Let us think only of living today well, and when tomorrow comes, it also will be today and we can think about it then. In all this we must have great trust and resignation to God’s providence. We must make provision for enough manna for today, and no more. Let us not doubt that God will provide more for us tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and all the days of our pilgrimage.  

In sum, the virtue of simplicity as it comes to us through Salesian spirituality promotes human integrity. It seeks a correspondence between what is interior and exterior, between our vision and our comportment. It leads to peace by focusing our pursuits clearly and squarely on the love of God. And it allows us to be real in a world that is fast becoming virtual, so that who and what and where we are in God’s eyes is all we need be.  

Notes  

1 Originally presented at the eleventh annual fall conference of the University of Notre Dame’s Center for Ethics & Culture (18-20 November 2010), whose theme was “Younger Than Sin: Retrieving Simplicity through the Virtues of Humility, Wonder, and Joy.”  


3 Introduction to the Devout Life, III:1.  


5 Œuvres de Saint François de Sales, édition complète (Annecy: J. Niérat, 1892-1964), XXVI:283.  


7 Wendy Wright, “Simplicity in the Salesian Sources,” Salesian Living Heritage (Spring/Fall 1989): 8. “It is Francis’s particular nuance. . . . In a very sophisticated society with all types of people doing every kind of machination, cautious about the manner of approaching people and what should be said to whom and what effect one is making and what little white lies will make this effect and that effect, he says: ‘No! We must be free of duplicity, free of guile, free of deceitfulness.’”


8 Oeuvres V:329; see Oeuvres XXVI:366 – “Take care to manage these little encounters that God presents to you, put in them your virtue, and do not desire great works; for often one lets himself be knocked down by a gnat when he combats monsters by imagination.”

9 Oeuvres XII:348.


11 Wright, “Simplicity in the Salesian Sources,” p. 10: “Francis does make a distinction between religious and laity. He says that this kind of radical resting on the breast of God without care of self, without self-protection, is the particular charism of the Visitandines. . . . Freedom from this demand [of worldly prudence] is the special luxury of the Visitation.”

12 On 5 March 1604, Jane Frances Frémyot, baroness de Chantal, attended the series of Lenten sermons hosted by her brother, the Archbishop of Dijon. The preacher was Francis de Sales. From their first encounter, and through his spiritual direction of her, a deep and lasting friendship was born. See Wendy Wright, “Spiritual Friendship and Spiritual Direction,” Studia Mystica 12 (March 1989): 49-63.


14 Wright, “Simplicity in the Salesian Sources,” p. 11: “In the early years of her relationship with Francis, Jane is a tremendously intuitive woman, with powers of discerning spirits within herself, a strong psychological sense. Part of her growth is in this simplification, moving away from examining every motive, looking at it, turning it over a million ways. She has becomes just simple, doing what needs to be done, looking to God in love.”

15 Oeuvres 17:16-17, with reference to Canticle 2:14.

16 Nevertheless, the Visitation lifestyle would still seek simplicity through exterior comportment in terms of dress (by wearing a widow’s habit), language (by promoting both cordiality and silence), and conduct (by the humble exercise of monastic ranks, which were to be changed each year).

17 As a literary form, the “conferences” are actually recollections of the talks as written by nuns with an incredibly strong memory. As to which published texts are “true” or “false” versions, and what that means for the reliability of the saint’s thought expressed there, see William Ruhl’s introduction to his new English translation of the French text reconstructed by Roger Devos (available online at www. oblates.org/ spirituality/spiritual_conferences).


20 Don Luigi Scanu, “La semplicità secondo San Francesco di Sales,” Rivista di ascetica e mistica 4/2 (1959): 144, describes it thus: “If the soul had eyes, simplicity could be compared to the lenses that render seeing more acute, (more) fixed on God.”

21 Oeuvres XII:167.


23 Oeuvres VI:22.

24 Oeuvres VI:20.


26 Conference 14, “On the Subject of Simplicity” (Devos, p. 179).

27 Ibid., p. 180.


29 Oeuvres XII:53-54.


Personal Reflection / Group Discussion

1. At what times in your life have you felt the need to live more simply? What led you to move in that direction? What might have held you back?

2. Are there other “little virtues” that it would be good for us to work on in our community or for me as an individual to give more attention to?
How could a man who so clearly extolled the virtues and simplicity of the continental structure in its early days seem so utterly clueless about it? The most profound truths are often the simplest ones, and Wallace was a genius at revealing the simplicity of profundity. Earlier for the sake of simplicity I told a little fib, and some of you have steam coming out of your ears by now because this fib is driving you crazy. Our midweek Senior Salesian Reflection comes to us from Conor Ryan ’20 - Conor offers a great perspective on loving ourselves, others and the possibility each new day brings! “This quote serves as a good reminder for me ‘cut myself some slack.’ Nobody is perfect, and nobody can be perfect. It definitely helps me to empathize and be patient when people make mistakes. When it comes to myself, I have to remember to be patient and humble with my failures, and simply strive to be better the next day.