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John 10, 14-18

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father."

Introduction

If you want to understand Fr. Joseph Occhio, look at Saint Francis de Sales and his Christian spirituality that is at once common and distinctive.

Saint Francis de Sales developed his spirituality from the currents of his times and his pastoral experiences especially in his work of re-establishing the Catholic faith among the inhabitants of the Chablais region of the duchy of Savoy. He used the word devotion to promote holiness, urging his listeners in an attractive way to take Christian life seriously, coherently and with commitment.

Among the ways that the spirituality of Saint Francis de Sales influenced Saint John Bosco and through him Fr. Joseph Occhio, five currents stand out: the love of God, humanism, zeal for souls or, today, called pastoral charity, asceticism and prayer.

Love of God

Saint Francis de Sales taught and lived in the truth that love is a gift from God who first loved us. Therefore, knowing that God loves him or her, the devout person wants to be united with God and to do God's will. From this flows the desire and, with God's grace, the ability to do everything out of love, to have a holy indifference to the will of God in all things, to love God in people and to love people in God, and to renounce self-will in humility and docility of heart.

What we remember and admire about Fr. Occhio is the coherence and transparency with which he lived his life. He continuously exercised love of God and love of neighbour. He did not claim personal or private interests, nor did he criticize or show displeasure in the major and minor events of life. He approached

everyone seemingly aware that the person before him is beloved by God. The inclination or disposition to please God characterized all he said and did.

Humanism

Saint Francis de Sales combined the best of renaissance humanism with Christianity. The human person, created in God's image and beloved of God, is the perfection of the universe. The body has positive value because it is necessary for doing good and for participating in eternal bliss. The spirit of freedom calls each one to do all for love and nothing by force. Relying on God, it is possible to overcome one's defects because good is always stronger than evil. When reason guides the will one becomes self-possessed. Each person strives for union with God in whatever his or her place or situation, according to the ordinary conditions of life, with whatever occupations or preoccupations one has. Cheerfulness, moderation, patience, tenderness, confidence in the good in people guide one's approach to daily life.

In his book, *Perspectives in Christian Humanism*, Fr. Occhio highlights the humanism of the "Gentleman Saint" under the aspect of kindness.

With rich or poor, cultured or uncouth, friend or foe, Francis was kind, always kind. Kindness was paramount in all his undertakings, it was his distinctive characteristic, his constant ideal. Even when St. Jane de Chantal, who in other respects understood him so well, at times insisted on adopting sterner measures to achieve faster or 'better' results, Francis, after having used all the means consonant with his system, would entrench himself in his silence. He believed in kindness and was adamant in abiding by it. Only by gentle kindness would he lead rebellious nature freely to accept the redeeming grace of the God of consolations. From this principle and its manifold practical applications one can readily gauge the unique and unprecedented contribution made by Francis of Sales to Christian Humanism in general and to the doctrine of the golden means in particular: *Ni trop, ni trop peu* (62-63).

Once, in a house of formation a discussion arose in a local council meeting on the suitability of a temporarily professed member for renewal of vows. Many serious objections arose, particularly about the person's limited abilities, inclinations and overall immaturity. Fr. Occhio gently, but firmly, insisted that, looking at his faith and fidelity to prayer, he should be allowed to continue. Time proved Fr. Occhio's trust in the ability of God to work in that person's life.

Zeal of the Good Shepherd

Today we call zeal for the salvation of souls pastoral charity to make it clear that apostolic action bears fruit only when taken for love of God and neighbour by one ingrained in Christ. Convinced that the person is the perfection of the universe, love is the perfection of the person and charity is the perfection of love, Saint Francis de Sales developed during his missionary time in the Chablais a method of winning people back to God by encountering them slowly, patiently, with a charity that becomes goodness, gentleness and humility. He found the strength to glorify God and seek the salvation of souls by living a post-Council of Trent simple, modest and poor style of life. All of this came to be summarized and associated with him in the motto, *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*.

In this post-Vatican Council II era, Fr. Occhio continued the simple, modest and poor style of life that never goes out of fashion, while “making pastoral visits” through his regularity in celebrating Masses, concluding holy hours, giving days of recollection to the ADMA and DBV branches of the Salesian Family, recording radio programs on Salesian spirituality, spending long hours hearing confession and giving spiritual direction. Much more can be added from his years in formation work and in parish ministry in Montréal and Edmonton. In these last years he, tired or not, sustained a significant email correspondence with those seeking his advice and sharing information. Here we can add his fidelity to the Church as God’s family existing for no other reason than the holiness of its members.

Asceticism

Saint Francis de Sales saw that the elements of true devotion have their proper place in the heart, where one encounters God’s love. He does not favour external ascetical practices and lengthy times of prayer, but rather that which bring about a conversion of heart. Even here one must approach one’s heart with kindness and gentleness. Attaining a reasonable control over instincts, emotions and passions takes time. Deal with the body according to its needs. Work during the day, rest at night, accept illnesses and setbacks with charity and patience. Practice the little virtues that lead to honesty, serenity and joy in the fulfilment of daily duties. Ask for nothing, refuse nothing. Be ready to suffer hot and cold, illness, privations, losses, injuries and offenses. Carry your cross with humility and cheerfulness. All aims at eliminating self-love and increasing love of God in Christ Jesus.

Fr. Occhio could not get angry or express disgust even at serious wrong. He preferred to give a person the benefit of the doubt. One never knew what his true feelings were, or, perhaps, in truth, he did not have any feelings other than those he found in the Heart of Christ. He seemed to be indifferent to all but God’s will. He

consciously lived by the Salesian principle of asking for nothing and refusing nothing. That's why it was impossible to find out what foods he liked and did not like. He moderated his eating and drinking according to the needs of his suffering body while never giving external signs of what he was feeling. He continued in his apostolic works, with great effort and fatigue towards the end, but would not ask to be relieved from his responsibilities. However, when he was asked to do something, such as use the stair chair, by the director, then he obeyed with his characteristic cheerfulness. He consistently projected a joy in living, serving, and doing good.

Prayer

Salesian mysticism is a resting in the Lord. While Saint Francis de Sales gives great value to the ecstasy of action, he does not discount the ecstasy of understanding and affection. Spiritual life is indivisibly contemplative and active, and prayer holds an essential place in it. For Saint Francis de Sales prayer is an exchange of love; one in love with God cannot stop thinking of Him. One dialogues with God, heart speaking to heart. To achieve this level of affective prayer one retreats into interior silence, even in the midst of daily activities. Affective meditation moves the person to resolutions. Participation in the public prayer of the Church, the Liturgy of the Hours, and in the regular reception of the Sacraments also contribute to one's living in God's presence. Salesian Marian devotion arises more from the tone of Saint Francis de Sales life and ministry than from a highly developed Marian theology. He found release from his predestination crisis praying the *Memorare*, he vowed chastity before her and named the order he founded the Visitation of Holy Mary. Mary was living in full love of God, doing God's will and teaching holiness by the example of her virtuous life.

Fr. Occhio knew that no apostolic action bears fruit unless the apostle is rooted in Christ. He was continuously in prayer. When not in anyone's immediate presence, such as when he was moving from one part of the church or rectory to another or when in his room, he seemed to be recollected in thought or in a colloquy with God. As soon as someone called for his attention or happened to come near him as he was walking he immediately drew his full attention to the situation at hand. He seemed to move almost instantaneously between contemplation and action. He almost always made reference to Mary in his homilies and talks.

Who Was Fr. Joseph Occhio?
Sermon at Vigil Service, December 16, 2014

We are gathered this evening to reflect on the sacred mystery of life, death and resurrection in Jesus Christ our Saviour, to commend the soul of Fr. Joseph Occhio to God's mercy and to thank God for the gift of his life and ministry.

Who was Fr. Joseph Occhio?

If we were to have asked Fr. Occhio, who is Fr. Joseph Occhio, he might have answered in the sincere and unaffected words of Pope Francis, "I am a sinner, a sinner on whom God has shown his mercy." I can also hear him giving the reply, "I am a Salesian priest." I would like to share with you how I see him as having modeled what it means to be a S-A-L-E-S-I-A-N.

S – Sainly

He gave us a witness of prayer. Without ever making a display of it, you could sense his union with God, with Our Lord, in all things and at all times. When you were in his presence it was easy to sense God's presence. No wonder he had the reputation of being a mystic.

A – Always Cheerful

Always means he maintained the spirit of St. Francis de Sales and of St. John Bosco, a spirit of gentleness and kindness. He was always smiling and genuinely happy to be with all people.

L – Life-giving

He showed us how to live, that is, as a pilgrim through life, walking with the Lord and to the Lord. Even his death coming during the season of Advent proclaims this. He pointed others to the Lord, the giver of life. His last gesture in life, that of squeezing the hand of the nurse attending him as if to thank her for assisting him, gave life as he let go of life.

E – Ecumenical

In these latter years Fr. Occhio developed a fine relationship with our neighbours at St. Paul the Apostle Anglican Church under the leadership of Rev. Brian Youngward, OHC. I remember the years immediately following Vatican Council II when, at Don Bosco College Seminary in Newton, New Jersey Fr. Occhio would organize ecumenical prayer service with representatives from various Christian communities during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the month of January.

S – Sacramental

How many turned to him for the Sacrament of Reconciliation and for spiritual direction! He was steady and reliable. He faithfully celebrated daily Mass, even on the day of his stroke and heart attack. As weak as he was becoming, he continued to conclude the various weekly holy hours by presiding over benediction.

We may add here his devotion to Mary. His memorial card captures both the reality and the significance of his life. He is vested for Mass, kneeling and praying the rosary.

I – Intelligent

Prepared with a graduate degree in theology and a doctorate in philosophy, he taught philosophy for twenty-nine years and briefly held the post of college president. He authored three books, including his doctoral dissertation on Irving Babbitt and American Humanism. Much of his teaching career and responsibilities in the formation of seminarians coincided with the early post-Vatican Council II era when it was not so easy to discern the value of the changes and new opinions emerging both in western society and in the Church. Here he combined a keen intellect with a Salesian wisdom of the heart.

A – Ascetical

Fr. Occhio suffered from life-long headaches. He underwent hip replacement in both hips, he experienced recurring digestion difficulties and in recent months was suffering from shortness of breath. Yet, externally all we saw was his calm, steady cheerfulness. You can sum up his practice of the Salesian asceticism of work and temperance by saying he was always there wherever and whenever he needed to be.

We come to the last letter of Salesian – N

What word fits best? He was nice, noble, noiseless (clapping his hands without them touching), never-negative, natural. There are not enough words beginning with N to describe his ninety-one years. Tonight, the one that speaks to us is that he was **near**. He was approachable, in touch with family and friends, friendly with all, and above all, near to Jesus and Mary.

Heavenly Father, we present to you Fr. Joseph Occhio asking that you have mercy on him who so reflected to us your joyful love and mercy. With deep gratitude we bless, praise and honour you for the gift of his life and ministry, a priest for 64 years and a Salesian for 74 years.