

Heritage Week at DeSales University

January 27, 2011



Homily for Thursday of the Third Week in Ordinary Time



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Francis de Sales, the Patron of Journalists

Memorial Mass for the Reverend John F. Harvey, O.S.F.S.

As we conclude our Heritage Week celebration this evening, we remember St. Francis de Sales as Patron of Journalists. He was given this title, some of you will recall, in view of his creative efforts in the early 1590's to re-evangelize the people of the Chablais region of Savoy who had converted to Calvinism. Nearby Geneva was a Calvinist stronghold, so much so that a decade later, when Francis was appointed Bishop of Geneva, he was not able even to enter the city, for he would have been arrested. His Chablais mission was not without its dangers, from man and beast alike. In addition to dodging Calvinist spies and agents, there is the famous story of the time when Francis encountered a pack of wolves and had to spend the night in a tree for safety, tying his cloak to a limb to keep from falling. He often had to say Mass in secret to feed the faith of the people.

In order to communicate the truths of the Catholic faith to more people, Francis would write out sermons and letters, have them copied and slipped under the doors of people in the area. In a way, he invented the use of pamphlets as a way of delivering instruction in the faith to people who otherwise would not hear about it, since he was prevented from preaching in public.

In addition to writing pamphlets, Francis was a prodigious correspondent, writing over 10,000 letters to the many people who relied on him for spiritual direction and advice. Then there were the controversies, the sermons, the conferences given to the Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary, and his two great classics, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*, among many other works. The time and effort that Francis dedicated to his correspondence is but one measure of his pastoral zeal, his real love of the people who were searching for God in their lives.

I don't know what Francis would think of the plethora of forms of communication we have today. I suspect, though, that he would take full advantage of e-mail, I-phone, the blogosphere, Facebook, and Twitter in order to spread the good news. The age of instant electronic communication, of course, brings with it great dangers, in that anyone, no matter how ignorant, dishonest, spiteful, and bigoted, can use the Internet for his or her own purposes. How important that there be people among us who, like St. Francis de Sales, continue to communicate consistently, clearly, and cogently the truth of gospel values and the Catholic faith!

One month ago today, we lost one of those people, FR. JOHN HARVEY. He died on the feast day of his patron saint, John the Evangelist, and on the eve of the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the day that St. Francis de Sales died in Lyons, in 1622. Before God called him home at the age of 92, Father Harvey, like Francis de Sales before him, spent virtually his whole adult life as an ardent defender of the faith. The author of the letter to the Hebrews could have been speaking of Father Harvey when he urged: "Let us hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy." Father Harvey believed with every fiber of his being that the God who made the promise is trustworthy, and he held unwaveringly to the faith as proclaimed by God's Church.

Like Francis de Sales, Father Harvey was an author, publishing five books, as well as numerous articles in professional journals. A gifted writer, Father set out cogent arguments to support his position—which was always the Church's position—on key moral questions of our time.

Tenacious as he was in defending and explaining the Church's doctrines, especially in the area of moral theology, Father Harvey possessed an exquisite pastoral sensitivity to those who struggle to live up to the challenges of those doctrines. His life, in fact, was a shining example of pastoral care and concern for the people of God. For almost the entire 66 years of his priesthood, Father worked with people with same-sex attractions. As Jesus came to seek out and save those who might be lost, Father Harvey sought out, supported, and counseled homosexual people to live a chaste life with the help of prayer, the sacraments, and group support. With a background in psychology as well as moral theology he was well equipped for the ministry he undertook with such energy, wisdom, and charity. Like St. Francis de Sales, he was a wonderful confessor, spiritual director, and counselor.

To assist men and women with same-sex attractions to remain chaste, he founded Courage, an organization he directed for thirty years. Courage grew from his first meeting with five men in a New York City rectory to an international organization with chapters in the U.S., Canada, England, Ireland, Poland, Mexico, Slovakia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, the Philippines, and New Zealand. Today there are more than

100 chapters of Courage worldwide. The growth of Courage was due primarily to the blood, sweat, and tears spent by Father Harvey.

In addition to Courage, he established Encourage for the support of family members of those with same-sex attractions. His interest in this field did not prevent him from speaking out on other issues of the day. For example, he participated in the March for Life in Washington every year at this time, no matter what the weather or his age.

Many of the Oblates, and many other men and women, knew Father Harvey as a teacher, a fine teacher, of moral theology. Many of his former students kept in touch with him, asking him to officiate at their marriages, baptize their children, and bury their loved ones. I had the honor of having him preach at my Mass of Thanksgiving after ordination.

Father Harvey was a confidant and friend of Bishops and Provincial Superiors, a consultant to the Vatican, a counselor to hundreds and teacher to thousands over his many years, including many students here at DeSales University.

All that, of course, is not why we loved him. We loved him for the twinkle in his eye and the way he threw his head back when he heard a good joke. We loved him for the way he sang “Too-ra-loo-a-loo-ra” after a wee bit of Irish whiskey. We Oblates also loved him for the things he *couldn't* do, like master the coffee maker, the Xerox machine, and the new voice mail system. Were we to tell Harvey stories, we would be here all night.

As we know from the many remarks made by his friends at the time of his funeral, Father Harvey did not keep his light under a bed or a bushel basket. As Jesus urged in the gospel today, he let it shine brightly before all who knew him. As many of these people pointed out, he brought light to them when they were struggling in darkness. Can any of us do better than this?

For the life of Fr. John Harvey, a life well lived as an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, a man of gentle strength, a priest, a theologian, a teacher, a counselor, a confrere, a man who laid down his life in unrelenting service to God, his Church, and his people, we thank God. Those of us who were lucky enough to know him have no doubt that when Father Harvey completed the last of his many journeys, arriving at the gates of heaven, the Lord was there, smiling, to greet him with those most fitting words: “Well done, my good and faithful servant John! Come, enter into the joy of your Master!”