SPIRITUAL DIRECTORY

of

St. Francis de Sales

A Simple Guide for
Living Each Day in
A Life-Giving Way

A Contemporary Presentation of a Spiritual How-to-Guide based upon an Interpretation by Jerry Weiss and Michael S. Murray, OSFS

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Introduction

In the spring of 1588, Francis de Sales (1567-1622) completed his study of liberal arts at Clermont College in Paris, and after successfully passing his examinations, he received the licentiate and master of arts degree. Shortly thereafter, he made his way to Padua, Italy, where he would spend the next three years of his life studying law and theology in the second oldest university town in Europe.

Francis was seriously concerned about continuing to cultivate and develop his spiritual life, even as he pursued graduate studies at the university. This was especially challenging in Padua, a city that, among other things, had a reputation for being a pretty wild, tough, and sometimes perilous place. In the interest of maintaining a healthy balance between things sacred and secular, Francis developed a simple, practical and down-to-earth program to help him to live in the world without being of the world, in ways that employed both disciplined resolve and artful skill.

Francis called this rule of life that he developed for himself at Padua his *Spiritual Exercises*, a title no doubt strongly inspired by the influence of his Jesuit education and spiritual formation. The *Spiritual Directory*, as it is known to the Oblate family, addresses activities during the day and preparation for Confession, Holy Communion, and Mass.

Spiritual Directory

Francis de Sales would later apply the lessons that he personally learned from using his own *Spiritual Exercises* when he and St. Jane de Chantal founded the Visitation of Holy Mary in 1610, developing what is now known as the *Spiritual Directory*. It was adapted two hundred and fifty years later for use by the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales and the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, the latter being a community of priests and brothers. This version is offered for use by people of any and every state and stage of life.

The goal of the *Spiritual Directory* is to assist us in developing the interior attitudes necessary to recognize the presence of God in all things, people, and circumstances - attitudes that likewise assist us in our efforts to embody the humble, gentle love of neighbour so clearly demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ.

Regardless of our unique role in God's plan of salvation, the challenge that we collectively face is how to accept, internalize, and pursue divine values, even while deeply engaged in the demands, responsibilities, limitations, and possibilities of the human experience. The *Spiritual Directory* helps us to see ourselves, others, and the entire created order through the mind, heart, and eyes of God, thus challenging us to treat ourselves and one another with profound respect and reverence, even in the midst of the give-and-take, the ups-and-downs of daily living.

Living Today Well

Beginning a New Day

As soon as you awake, simply remind yourself that God is with you: in you, and around you. Thank God for having brought you safely through the night and giving you the gift of a new day. The following thoughts may be helpful:

Sleep is the image of death and awakening on the resurrection.

O dead arise and come to judgment.

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that on the last day I will rise again. My God, grant that this be to eternal glory; this hope rests in my inmost being.

On that day, O God, you will call me, and I will answer you; you will stretch forth your right arm to the work of your hands; you have counted all my steps.

Dressing

Ask God to cover you with the particular virtues or gifts that you will need for the day ahead. Francis recommends that we say:

Cover me, Lord, with the cloak of innocence and the robe of love. My God, do not let me appear before you stripped of good works.

A Direction of Intention

Develop your own way - a word, a sentence, a thought, an image - that will help you to remain aware of God's enduring presence in all the things that you will be about today: eating, drinking, driving, commuting, working, reading, speaking, listening and, hopefully, even relaxing. Ask for the grace and the strength to remain as centered and even-tempered as possible toward yourself and others in the midst of today's successes, setbacks and everything else in between. When you are mindful of God's presence you might simply say, *God Be Blessed*.

You may also ask Our Lady, your Patron Saint, your Guardian Angel, and all the souls to intercede for you this day.

Preparing Your Day

As you continue your rising routine, use the exercise steps below to prepare for the day.

Invocation

Simply ask God to assist you by praying these or similar sentiments:

Lord, if you do not take care for my soul, it is useless that another should do so.

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Your good spirit will guide me by the hand on level ground, and your divine majesty by its inexpressible love and boundless charity will give me true life.

Foresight

Consider the day ahead. Think of the potential rough spots that the day may bring, asking for the grace to be especially self-aware, self-controlled, and self-disciplined.

Plan of Action

Look at your calendar. Review your PDA. Consider how you can make time for yourself and for God, even in the midst of all that you will be about today.

Resolve

Make a conscious decision to do your level best to follow God's will today, especially as it may be revealed in the circumstances, people, and events that come your way. De Sales provides these thoughts:

My soul, will you not cheerfully obey the holy will of God, seeing that your salvation comes from Him?

Let evil men do their worst against me. The Lord, the king, can overcome them all. Let the world complain about me to its heart's content. This means little to me because He who holds sway over angelic spirits is my protector.

Recommendation

Finally, place all your cares and concerns into God's hands. These thoughts may be helpful:

I have asked you one thing, O Jesus, my Lord, and I shall ask you again and again, namely, that I may faithfully carry out your loving will all the days of my poor and pitiable life.

I commend to you, O gracious Lord, my soul, my life, my heart, my memory, my understanding, and my will. Grant that with and in all these, I may serve you, love you, please and honour you, forever.

Living Your Day

Liturgy of the Hours

It has become more common that lay people participate in *Christian Prayer: The Liturgy of Hours*. This is the prayer of the church and is not reserved for religious, but for people in all walks of life. Making time to pray Morning and Evening Prayer is another opportunity to spend time with the Lord. This may often be in private. Be reminded of the words in St. Matthew's gospel, *"But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your father in secret. And your Father who sees you in secret will repay you."* (Mt 6: 6)

Whenever possible participate in the prayer of the Church in common, for Christ has said *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am."* (Mt 18:20)

Silence, Meditation, and Daily Readings and Prayers

In the busy world of today making time for silence, meditation, and daily readings and prayers is difficult but is very necessary. If you can make time to exercise to stay physically strong and mentally alert, then all the more should you take time to exercise to stay spiritually strong.

Plan a time each day to withdraw from the world to spend a little time with God. Try to make it part of your daily routine. Retreat into the silence of your heart to meditate on the Scriptures and other spiritual books. You can use guides such as *The Word Among Us* for daily Scripture readings. The writings of St. Francis De Sales, *The Introduction to a Devout Life*, *Treatise on the Love of God*, and the transcripts of his sermons on prayer and Lent are just a few that can help lift your heart to God. You may plan to say the Rosary going to and from work each day.

When you begin this exercise, place yourself in the presence of God and implore His help. Helpful thoughts:

O sweet Jesus, look down on me with merciful eyes.

Lord, take away from me anything that might be displeasing in your sight.

Upon completion, offer this action to Our Lord for his glory, for the honour of the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady and Mother, and for the salvation of all creation.

During the day, try to be mindful of God's presence. Give Him thanks when something that you thought of during the *Preparation of the Day* turns out as planned. Say short ejaculatory prayers whenever you are mindful of God's presence in your life. In his sermon, *The Heart of Prayer* (Palm Sunday, April 12, 1615), St. Francis De Sales encourages, *"...go about your affairs, resolved, nevertheless, to raise your spirit to God, even amidst company...speaking to Him in the depth of your heart...Make short but fervent aspirations."* Try to make each day a continuous prayer.

How is Your Heart?

An Examination of Conscience

Plan to examine your conscience twice a day: once around midday, and the other in the evening.

Your midday examination should refer back to the resolutions you made during your preparation of the day (the virtues you pledged to practice, the tough spots or situations you anticipated, the responsibilities foreseen) as well as anything else that happened during the morning. Your early evening

examination should likewise refer back to your preparation of the day and all that has happened since your midday examination.

A simple format for the examination would include the following questions:

How is my heart toward God?
How is my heart toward my neighbor? How is my heart toward myself?
How is my heart toward what has happened today?

Conclude each examination of conscience by (1) gratefully giving thanks to God for the good that you may have accomplished through God's grace and through your efforts, and by (2) gently acknowledging any sins or failings that you committed to this point and humbly asking God to forgive you. In sum, ask for the courage you need to strengthen your resolve to live well the portion of the day that remains ahead.

Taking Nourishment and Recreation

Meals

Meals are not simply an opportunity to feed our bodies. Meals can also provide a forum in which to nourish our relationships with others. Meals (however simple, quick or even hurried) can give us a chance to reconnect with the people who mean the most to us: family, friends, neighbours and colleagues.

Offer grace before and after meals. Be thankful for all the ways in which God nourishes you: with food, family, friends, and fellowship. Seize the opportunity to celebrate life and to support others in their attempts to be the people God calls them to be. Just as Christ gave his very body and blood to us at table, so be willing to be food and drink for others.

Recreation

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy...or even worse.

Learn to play as hard as you work. In the midst of all of your responsibilities at home and at work, make - and take - the time to renew yourself. Refresh yourself; get refreshed with others. Read a book; rent a movie, go out to dinner; take a walk; go on a picnic; take a drive through the country. Extend - and accept - many opportunities to make new friendships and nurture long-standing ones.

Recreation is rather complex these days. Our family members and friends have many and various commitments. Our tastes are not all the same. Make an effort to do things together. There may be occasions when we don't necessarily have an interest in the activities of another family member or friend. Take the opportunity to deny your will and support another. Try to listen more than speak. Enjoy the company of others and be mindful of God's presence.

Retiring

The purpose of this exercise is to plan our actions if we awake during the night. St. Francis De Sales has gathered several short thoughts in the event that we wake during the night. In such an event say:

At midnight someone shouted: The groom is here! Come out and greet him.

0 Lord, since your merciful heart made you come down from heaven to earth to visit us, please enlighten those who lie prostrate in the darkness of ignorance and in the shadow of eternal death: if it be your will, guide us into the path of interior peace.

You neither slumber nor sleep, you who guard the Israel of our souls. The most intense darkness of midnight can present no obstacle to your divine activity; at that hour you were born of the holy Virgin, your mother, at that hour, too, you can cause your heavenly graces to be born in our souls and completely fill us with your choicest blessings. Merciful Redeemer, so enlighten my poor blind heart with the beautiful rays of your grace that it may never remain in any way in the death of sin; O, I beg you, do not allow my invisible enemies to say: We have overcome him.

Watchman, watchman, does much of the night of our imperfections still remain?

The morning of good inspirations has come; why do you love the darkness more than the light?

Neither the sun nor its rays are my principal light, but God alone, who is as merciful to me by night as He is by day.

These short prayers are to help remind you that you are in the presence of God at all times.

Preparations

Mass

Many are privileged to attend Mass on a daily basis. Unfortunately, most are unable to do so; therefore, the preparation for Mass on Sunday is all the more important. Participation in the Mass today is much easier than years ago when the Mass was in Latin. St. Francis De Sales' guidance was given to keep those not celebrating the Mass involved in the great mystery of our faith.

When you arrive at Church place yourself in the presence of God. Be attentive to acknowledging your faults when we are invited to do so. During the Liturgy of the Word, listen to the readings of the day and the homily. Try to be mindful of the theme throughout the week. When the gospel is proclaimed and, as you sign yourself, say:

May God be in my mind, on my lips, and in my heart, that I may accept this holy Gospel.

Participate in the Liturgy of the Eucharist and at the consecration, remind yourself that this is the act of redemption for the remission of the sins of the whole world.

If possible, receive Holy Communion which is discussed below. At the end of Mass and before leaving Church, ask the Lord to be mindful of his presence during the coming week.

Confession

As you prepare for the sacrament of Reconciliation ask for the grace of the Holy Spirit to discern your faults. Your daily examination of conscience will assist in this preparation. Ask Our Lord for pardon and for the grace to correct our faults.

Introduction to the Devout Life is an excellent help in preparing for a general confession. Part I focuses on the points of meditation prior to the general confession and the protestation afterwards. Part V helps you to revisit your commitment and examine your progress.

Say an Act of Contrition which affirms your resolution to do penance and amend your life.

Holy Communion

Holy Communion was addressed separately from the Mass in the original Directory because many people attended Mass and did not receive Holy Communion. Conversely, today, attending

Mass and receiving communion are part of a single act of worship. St. Francis De Sales encourages that preparation for Holy Communion begins the evening before. This is especially important for those who can only attend Mass on Sunday. The act of receiving Holy Communion should be one of holy reverence and spiritual joy that you should be so blessed as to receive our gentle Saviour.

Prior to reception of the sacrament, say an Act of Contrition.

Upon reception of the Body and Blood of Christ, think of such aspirations as:

Who am I Lord, and who are you?

Where does this blessing come from - that my Lord should come to me?

Yes, come, Lord Jesus.

After receiving Holy Communion, you can use the affections below to build a spiritual bouquet for the week ahead.

My Lord, be not far from me.

I will fear no evil because you are at my side.

. . . .

O Lord,
because you have given me
this great grace,
I will bless you eternally and forever
and will make your praises
as countless as
the stars of the sky.

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