

Cultivating “Real” Intelligence

Each year on the feast of St. Francis de Sales (January 24), the patron saint of Catholic journalists, the pope publishes a message for the celebration of World Communications Day (celebrated on the Sunday before Pentecost). [The theme for the 2024 message](#) concerns the revolution of “artificial intelligence” and the challenges that this poses to truly human communications.



We know that Francis de Sales was quite intelligent and a successful communicator! After all, he is recognized as a “doctor” of the Church, whose writings remain insightful for knowing the way to salvation. So, too, he is considered a “master” of sacred eloquence, whose spoken knowledge from the pulpit provides light for the intellect and warmth for the will.

Not surprisingly, then, our patron saint champions the work of the mind. From a young age, he pondered the power of reason – really, its “beauty” – as that which distinguishes human beings from all other animals (when we use it!). Standing in a long line of Christian humanists, Francis holds to the view that reason gives us the ability to govern our lives, even when our thoughts or passions seem to be battling within us.

That’s why he so values learning, recommending that we “study more and more, with diligence and humility” (Letters, XXI:11). It’s why he could often be found personally teaching the catechism to the people in his diocese (initiating what we now know as C.C.D.). The saintly bishop also instructed his clergy routinely on topics in theology, even going so far as to claim that “knowledge, to a priest, is the eighth sacrament of the hierarchy of the Church” (Oeuvres, XXIII:303) – because erroneous teaching has the power to lead souls astray!

But in Salesian Spirituality, there’s more to intelligence than just smarts. For Francis, knowledge finds its ultimate purpose in love. The operations of the intellect that he describes – thought, study, meditation, and contemplation – are intended to lead and unite us to Wisdom itself by way of an appreciation of the truth, beauty, and goodness of God.

Yes, our patron saint was eminently intelligent. But the wisdom he shares through his writing and speaking is always inclined to what is practical and live-able. Though mystical in its magnificence, it comes down to us as “inspired common sense” (Elisabeth Stopp).

That’s the kind of intelligence that can benefit us. Faced with today’s challenge of information overload, we find ourselves having to navigate the turbulent waves of digital news (real or fake), political arguments (conservative or liberal), and public opinions (logical or not). Perhaps now more than ever, “we need to have a well-balanced and reasonable mind” (Introduction to the Devout Life, III:36).

Reading (again) [the works of St. Francis de Sales](#) is a great place to do that. Surely his saintly wisdom will help us to cultivate our own minds, so that we might learn to live in love. That, ultimately, is the mark of an intelligence that is “real” not artificial.

Fr. Thomas Dailey, OSFS

The John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics & Social Communications
Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary