

Five Steps to a Good Morning

The mental activity described here is a shortened version of what St. Francis de Sales says of the morning exercise in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. While its five parts appear at first to be rather detailed, this exercise is not intended to be painstaking or time-consuming. Rather, it can and should be done briefly, yet fervently, as a way to focus our thinking about the day that beckons.

Since the preparation makes provision for all our actions, we will make use of it according to varying circumstances. By this means we will endeavor to be disposed to carry out our activities competently and commendably.

To complete this exercise each morning takes a bit of practice. When and where we do this preparation will depend greatly on what else is going on around us (our *varying circumstances*). But no matter what these circumstances require is this prayerful preparation that St. Francis de Sales begs readers of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* “never to omit this exercise.” For many of us, it will be possible to find a time and place to do this exercise (e.g., during the extended look in the bathroom mirror while shaving or hair-styling, or while the morning coffee is brewing).

Like every other aspect of getting ready in the morning, this exercise has an eminently practical purpose — namely, to help us do well those things that we have to do anyhow! That is why life coaches, leadership gurus, and spiritual masters of varying traditions all recommend the conscious consideration of our daily duties and responsibilities as the best place to start on the quest to become the person we want to be.

In the Salesian tradition, that consideration necessarily includes God, which makes this morning exercise more than just a highly successful but secular habit (e.g., in the mold of Steven Covey enterprises). The Salesian preparation is decidedly spiritual, because it “makes provision for all [our] actions” not only as entries on a calendar but as expressions of God’s will for us during this particular day. It renders the entirety of our day as consisting of occasions for the practice of virtue, and thus *commendable* activities for which we need to be *competent* in a spiritual way.

Step 1: Invocation

We will invoke the help of God, saying:

Lord, if you do not care for my soul, it is useless that another should do so. (Ps 127:1)

We will ask him to make us worthy to spend the day with him without offending him. For this purpose, the words of the psalm may be helpful:

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Your good spirit will guide me by the hand on level ground (Ps. 143:10), and your divine majesty by its inexpressible love and boundless charity will give me true life.

As with all things spiritual, we begin by asking for divine grace to help us. Doing so situates the exercise in its rightful realm as prayer and not merely planning. We make this prayer by acknowledging God’s benevolent providence: his “care for my soul,” his “good spirit,” his “boundless charity” — all expressed with personal regard for me and my life. In response to this divine goodness toward us, we put our entire day into a transcendent

context and intend to spend the day faithfully with God, in and through the immanent things we have to do. Envisioning what those things are constitutes the next step.

Step 2: Foresight

This is simply a preview or conjecture of all that could happen during the course of the day. Thus, with the grace of Our Lord, we will wisely and prudently anticipate occasions which could take us by surprise.

Taking a mental glance at the day's calendar, we *preview* what awaits us in terms of places to go and things to do and people to see. Here we activate the insightfulness of Salesian spirituality — namely, that the responsibilities of our personal vocation constitute the real place where we act out the devout life.

But this conjecture involves more than simply pondering our to-do list for the day. As an act of prayer, this foresight considers our daily tasks as occasions for living out our Faith or, conversely, as occasions that might tempt us to do otherwise. In the familiar words of corporate strategic planning, we envision “opportunities” and “threats,” but here they are to be considered in terms of our being a disciple of the Lord this day. To live that discipleship well, we take the next step.

Step 3: Plan of Action

We will carefully plan and seek out the best means to avoid any faults. We will also arrange in an orderly fashion what, in our opinion, is proper for us to do.

Each day, indeed all of human life, is fraught with temptations, and we all have our faults. In this intersection of the secular and the personal, we come up against roadblocks to devotion, potential obstacles to living a life of charity carefully, frequently, and promptly. In the Salesian planning process, we deal with these first.

If we can foresee problematic situations we are likely to face at some point in the day, we can better prepare “to avoid any faults” there and instead to respond as God would have us do. Perhaps we will encounter someone we know to be annoying. Perhaps we will be especially challenged by some task. Perhaps we will have to endure something particularly trying. Each of these moments in our day holds the possibility of vice or virtue, which is why determining how we will respond requires careful planning on our part. The goal here is to envision these episodes ahead of time so as not to be caught off guard when they happen.

Thus readied for any temptations that may threaten our devotion, we should also prepare for those potentially positive opportunities to serve God well. In all these considerations, we simply put into our minds an idea about how we should or should not act. Whether our plans come to fruition is another story! But as the day begins, we make it our intention to avoid vice and to practice virtue — not in general, but according to the concrete situations that actually await us. That intention is the foundation of the next step.

Step 4: Resolution

We will make a firm resolution to obey the will of God, especially during the present day. To this end, we will use the words of the royal prophet David:

My soul, will you not cheerfully obey the holy will of God, seeing that your salvation comes from him? (Ps. 62:2)

Surely this God of infinite majesty and admittedly worthy of every honor and service can only be neglected by us through a lack of courage. Let us, therefore, be consoled and strengthened by this beautiful verse of the psalmist:

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 all the angelic spirits is my protector. (Ps. 99:1)

To be effective, the foregoing considerations of how to live this day well cannot be mere data points or calendar entries. Here, the practical dimension of Salesian spirituality emphasizes the need to move beyond knowledge into the realm of the will. Our actions arise from our choices and decisions, which ultimately are what will make us into the persons we desire to become.

Thus, the saint exhorts us to “resolve firmly” to live according to God’s will. Making a resolution is all we can do at this point, since the day’s activities are still in the future. But resolve we must; otherwise, our preparation remains nothing but nice ideas or hopeful wishes.

To make a resolution is to make a decision, and decisions get us going. To go in the right direction, we align our decisions with what we have come to see as God’s holy will for us this day. After all, if the destination of our devotion (and our life) is union with God, we begin to reach that eternal objective by uniting ourselves to the divine will in the human reality of the present. This we can do *cheerfully!* The day will still have its challenges, to be sure. But by bringing faith to the responsibilities we have to face this day, we can be consoled and strengthened, knowing that a loving and merciful God remains at our side. But before we set foot out the door, one final step remains.

Step 5: Recommendation

We will entrust ourselves and all our concerns into the hands of God’s eternal goodness and ask him to consider us as always so commended. Leaving to him the complete care of what we are and what he wants us to be, we will say with all our heart:

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. (Ps. 27:4; 40:9)

I commend to you, O gracious Lord, my soul, my life, my heart, my memory, my understanding, and my will. Grant that in and with all these, I may serve you, love you, please and honor you forever. (Ps. 31:6; Luke 23:46)

Entrusting ourselves — this is the final step because it is the ultimate act of faith. We have done all that we could do at this point (preparing and resolving). Now we recognize that all our concerns are best left in bigger hands, hands whose providential power knows no limit, whose mercy envelops us with “complete care.” We cast ourselves into God’s loving grasp with regard to our personal identity (“who we are”) and our vocational destiny (“what he wants us to be”). The verses of the psalm, or whatever aspiration we choose to use, serve both to effect this recommendation (a prayer) and to provide confidence (a grace) as we now begin the day.