

Living in the Present Moment

by [Sister Susan Marie](#) | Aug 26, 2011 | "[Living Jesus](#)" booklet, [Salesian Spirituality](#), [St. Francis de Sales](#)



St. Francis de Sales

St. Francis de Sales has been called a Christian existentialist because of his emphasis on the present. His advice is: ***” Live one day at a time, leaving the rest in God’s care..go along with confidence in Divine Providence, worrying only about the present day and leaving your heart in the Lord’s care.”***

The past and future are to be surrendered in confidence into the hands of the Lord who will forgive our past failings and be our sure hope in the future. That leaves only the present moment in which we are called to be actively united to God’s will for us. St. Francis would have us direct our intention to whatever God wants for us in the moment at hand. If the past is over and the future not yet, then only the present, temporarily and existentially, can be a realistic locus for the Divine will. St. Francis has little time for people who live in “what might have been” or in “what might be”. The present moment provides the only possibility for encounter with the living God through an active embrace of God’s will.

Live in the Present Moment

by [Sister Susan Marie](#) | Apr 24, 2013 | [Salesian Spirituality](#), [St. Francis de Sales](#)

***Here is an important hint for Holy Living in the Salesian Tradition:
Live in The Present Moment:***



St. Francis de Sales offers us this helpful advice: “Leave the past to God’s mercy, the future to his Divine Providence and embrace the present willingly and lovingly.”

It can be very futile to dwell on the past and even more so to worry about the future. The Romans expressed it well: “Carpe Diem!” Live today well.

Living in the present moment is an important element in Salesian spirituality which encourages us to concentrate on the gifts or challenges of the present

and accept them as coming from the loving hand of God – no matter how indirectly. Use them well to grow in holiness!

Sr. Mary Berchmans Hannan, VHM

BARTIMAEUS' QUIET PLACE **Sacrament of Present Moment**

FRANCIS DE SALES AND THE SACRAMENT OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

(As excerpted from — http://www.visitationmonastery.org/stlouis/talk_living_in_the_moment.htm)

Let me begin with a story. After many years of effort a prisoner tunneled himself under the prison walls up onto a playground. As he brushed the dirt from his clothes, he shouted, "I'm free at last!" A little girl who had watched the whole proceedings, came up to him and said, "That's nothing. I'm four." This talk will not be about freedom from prison bars or other external forces, but about that inner freedom or liberty of spirit at the core of Salesian spirituality which enables us to remain at peace as we live our lives in union with God.

Freedom of Spirit

Liberty of spirit is an inner freedom that allows each one of us to recognize and then to respond to God's constant and challenging presence in our lives. This freedom to choose and act is essential to our nature as human beings according to Salesian spirituality. God has given us the gift of free will to enable us to cooperate freely in the work of our personal salvation, but the choice of whether or not we do so is still ours. When we discussed God's will in the talk, *The Two Wills of God*, we learned that we become co-creators with God whenever we make life choices based on discernment enlightened by our powers of judgment and the movements of our hearts. Add to this the innumerable calls on us to do this or that. Life becomes a series of choices, a few major ones but most of them very insignificant. I am going to let you in on a secret: 99% of the time, God is pleased with whatever we do provided our actions are motivated by love.

God loves us and wants us to become our true selves and to live in harmony with the desires of our heart. This may be the rub. Do we know our deepest desires? Foreseeing the events of the day with our Lord during prayer is one way of getting in touch with these desires and even with our true selves. The love inspiring our choices will be purified by this prayer encounter with the Spirit of God dwelling within us. In his October 1604 letter to Jane, Francis discusses the meaning of liberty of spirit. He says that liberty of spirit is the freedom of the children of God who know they are loved. It is the

detachment of a Christian heart from all things so that it is free to follow the known will of God. Provided that the name of God is hallowed, that His kingdom is coming in us, that His will is being done, a free spirit has no other concern. I always like to point out the timelessness of Salesian spirituality which allows us great freedom to follow what might be called a spirit-led approach to religion and life. These teachings of Jane and Francis from the 17th century are still relevant today.

For a 20th century approach to liberty of spirit, I paraphrase Paul Tillich in *The Eternal Now* who says that God is present to our spirit, not as the creative ground of all things nor as the stage director of history, but as a presence in our personalities that grasps, inspires and transforms us. For the Spirit at work in us awakens a desire to strive towards the sublime and gives us the courage to say "Yes" to life in spite of the difficulties we experience around and within us. The Spirit gives us the strength to throw off false anxieties and provides us with insights into ways not only to cope with the happenings in our world but even to rejoice in the challenges presented.

Salesian spirituality says that we exercise our freedom of choice primarily by the way we choose to love. We can choose between loving for self-serving ends that satisfy our ego desires and loving with a "pure love" that models God's unconditional love for us. We choose between objects of love that by their nature could lead us either away from or toward God. We have a choice too in whether or not we love the facts of our lives, the unique situations in which we find ourselves.

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How do we accept the things that happen in our lives? In the Salesian view, our human nature was created with a desire for good and an inner dynamic of love that moves us towards conformity to the divine will. But our human nature is wounded. Augustine in his prayer, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in You, O Lord," described the plight of each and every one of us. According to Tillich, we all try to escape from God. We may flee to work which then becomes a necessity and a compulsion. We may lose ourselves in the ecstasy of living, the abundance of life. But God pursues us as Francis Thompson says in his poem, *The Hound of Heaven*. Nigh and nigh draws the chase, With unperturbed pace, Deliberate speed, majestic instancy; And past those noised Feet A voice comes yet more fleet— 'Lo! naught contents thee, who content'st not Me.'

The poem ends with: Ah,, fondest, blindest, weakest, I am He Whom thou seekest! Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.'

So, the essential task of our life is to recover the ability to love purely. In the fine arts center of the St. Paul Visitation there are stained glass windows depicting Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal. Etched in the glass of one window is this saying, "All through love, nothing through constraint!" This quotation from Francis de Sales was the background music of our formation as Visitation nuns, and echoes Jesus' words at the Last Supper found in John 15 verse 9b and following. "Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love...This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you. A person can have no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend."

Openness to the Spirit of God

If I do all through love and nothing through constraint, then I will love all creation deeply and reverently. I will have a respect for all creatures and a non-possessive love for people which allows them the freedom to be fully themselves in God. In Salesian terminology this is called "indifference" which may be defined as openness to the Spirit of God dwelling within which enables a person to love creatures deeply without becoming attached to them unduly. It means seeing God in all things. It is a readiness to receive whatever He sends. It is about perceiving each person solely in the hope of the wholeness to which he or she was created. It treats creation as a product of God's loving hand to be appreciated and reverently used but never ravaged for self-serving ends. Pure love of creatures and of God go hand in hand. In this area we could learn a lot from the native Americans. For example, whenever they killed an animal for food, they prayed for its spirit and thanked the animal for its gift of life to them.

Indifference is central to Salesian spirituality since, when active in our lives, this virtue frees us to experience the liberty of the children of God. Indifference? Who wants to be indifferent to life? In Francis' mind there was no confusion between the virtue of indifference and the indifference that is a form of laziness. To illustrate this, I quote from his letter to Madame de la Flechere written in October 1608. He says, I greatly approve of the kind of indifference you are showing ... since it stems from your consideration of the will of God. I have no use for people who have no likes or dislikes, and who, no matter what happens, remain unmoved; they are this way either from a lack of energy and of heart, or through an unconcern for the difference between good and evil. But those whose indifference is the result of being totally surrendered to God ought to be most grateful, for this is a great gift.

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Notice Francis' comment that Madame's indifference stems from her consideration of the will of God. As a spiritual director, Francis guided directees to live courageously between the two wills of God. Then notice that the fruit of indifference is total surrender to God. That is indeed a great gift. In short, living between the two wills of God produces the virtue of indifference whose fruit is total surrender to God, a total letting go so that God may fill our hearts emptied of all desires except His will. What more could we want from life!

As spiritual directors, both Jane and Francis encouraged their directees to become aware of God's movements within them and to respond fully to the spirit of God that speaks and lives uniquely within each one of us. For them, indifference extended even to prayer, accepting both desert and Tabor experiences in prayer as gifts from God. Francis wrote to Madame de Granieu in 1618. I quote: "Your kind of prayer is very good, indeed much better than if you made many reflections and used many words, for these are only meant to arouse our affections; if God is pleased to give us affections without the reflections and words, this is a great grace. The secret of secrets in prayer is to follow our attraction in simplicity of heart."

Later in the same letter is an example of the liberty of spirit he offered to his directees. "Although you ought to prepare a point for meditation, if God drew you to a particular affection as soon as you came into His presence, then you were not to hold on to the point, but follow the affection; the more simple and peaceful it is, the better, for then it will bind your soul more closely to its object... Don't waste time during prayer trying to understand what you are doing or how you are praying; for the best prayer is that which keeps us so occupied with God that we don't think about ourselves or about what we are doing. In short, we must go to prayer simply, in good faith and artlessly, wanting to be close to God so as to love Him, to unite ourselves to Him. True love has scarcely any method."

In this letter Francis makes three recommendations for prayer: First, we need to prepare a point for meditation. By "point for meditation" Francis meant reading a Scripture passage in the hope that reflection upon it during prayer would arouse affections for God within us. These affections are the essence of prayer. Here we use our intellect to help us make contact with God. Second, sometimes God takes the initiative and invades our hearts. He skips over the reflection stage and stills our souls in awe before Him. Or God may flood our beings immediately with affections of love, yearning, sorrow for sin, etc. Since being with God in silence or dialogue is the heart of prayer, we then omit the points. Here heart knowledge is our contact with God. Third, our prayer focuses on God, not on our relationship to God nor on what we are doing as we pray. We are content to remain simply before God in an attitude of surrender. The above is called methodless prayer and is the hallmark of Salesian

spirituality. It is a simple waiting before God in loving attention. This prayer of waiting may be filled with consolations or dryness. Dryness was Jane's portion for decades, and it sanctified her. For to be as content in desolation and dryness as in consolation and sweetness is the height of disinterested love.

Salesian teaching on indifference, that true liberty of the children of God, is summed up in Francis de Sales' oft-quoted maxim: "Ask for nothing, refuse nothing." This liberty neither seeks a specific result nor rejects what in fact is. As Francis put it in a letter to Jane in 1604, "The will of God is indicated in two ways: through necessity or charity. For example: I would like to preach the Lenten sermons in a small town in my diocese. But if I get sick or break a leg, there's no point in feeling sorry or worried about not preaching, for I can be sure that God wants me to serve Him by suffering and not by preaching. However, if I'm not sick and an occasion comes along to go preach in another place where people might become Huguenots if I didn't go, this would be the will of God, signifying clearly enough that I should very simply change my plans."

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So, human liberty resides, not in not caring about what happens (even if that were possible) but in caring more that God's results be accomplished whatever the outcome. As indicated in the above quotation, the practice of Salesian liberty becomes a freedom to serve in a spirit of detachment or indifference to our personal "I'd rathers." And its effects in one's personality and life, according to Francis in this same letter "are a great inner serenity, a great gentleness and willingness to yield in everything that isn't sin; it's a flexible disposition, able gracefully to do the virtuous or charitable thing." In short, the freedom of the children of God is the birthright of those who know they are loved. This freedom leads one to detachment of the heart from all things so that it is free to follow the known will of God. Finally, this indifference extends even to the realms of sanctification and salvation. When Francis suffered his temptations regarding predestination, he attained peace of heart only when he could say that even if it were God's will for him to be destined to hell after death, still NOW and for as long as he lived, he would love and serve God with all of his being and strength. What was important for him is that God's will be done; he became indifferent even to his own salvation. This is the height of detachment! Of course, we know that when Francis gave into God's hands the concern for his own salvation, the temptation vanished.

Living in the Present Moment

A young couple had just returned from their honeymoon. As the husband set off for his first day of work he said, "I'm going to work hard, and someday we are going to be rich." His wife replied, "We are already rich, dear, for we have each other. Someday maybe we'll have money." Talk about values and priorities. Money is indeed wonderful, but happiness does not depend on it. Our real riches lay in who we are for each other. This wife has a certain rootedness in the present and is indifferent to non-essentials. We have been talking about detachment or indifference. Now let us turn to rootedness in the present. Have we let go of the past? Do we daydream about the future? Or do we live in the present, the NOW moment of life?

Several years ago, I experienced a life-changing insight. The past is dead and gone. There is nothing I can do to modify or change it. So why rehash it in my imagination? Why not leave it in the hands of God's mercy and love? The future has not yet arrived. My dreams and nightmares might never become reality. Why then waste my life in fantasizing about what might or might not happen tomorrow? Why not let God take care of the future according to His loving providence? The NOW moment of my life is ALL that I really have. If I become totally aware of what is happening around me right now, then life becomes a succession of now moments, and I become fully alive! St. Irenaeus said God's glory is a person fully alive! Isn't it wonderful to think that each one of us glorifies God by our uniqueness! So, whenever any of us experience a moment of having no concern about the past or the future, when we become totally aware of what is happening in our surroundings, then we are living in the Now. This is a timeless moment; some would call it eternity. Charlotte Gilman in her journal, *The Forerunner*, says "Eternity is not something that happens after you are dead. It is going on all the time. We are in it now."

But for this to be true for us, we have to let go of the past. Why is this important? Long-term hurts and other garbage psychologically speaking, can preoccupy us so much that we are unable to be sensitive to what is important and good in our lives now. The past is dead. While it is natural to be angry over the hurtful actions of people in our past, still there comes a time when we must let go and move on in life, or we will shrivel up and die in our spirits if not in our bodies. In the end, we have to do this for ourselves; we must let go of the past and face life as it is now for us.

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You will recall that in 1601 Jane's husband died as a result of a hunting accident. Though Baron de Chantal immediately had forgiven his cousin, M. d'Anlezy, who had fired the fatal shot, Jane remained lost in her grief which was so intense that her health suffered. Jane eventually pardoned M. d'Anlezy

but she refused to see him and would not allow his name to be mentioned in her presence. She met Francis during the Lent of 1604. When Francis saw that she was not ready for a reconciliation with M. d'Anlezy, Bougaud, Jane's best known early biographer, says that Francis "followed his usual prudent and gentle method of not anticipating grace." In June 1605 Jane wrote how her loved husband had died with words of pardon on his lips for all who had offended him. Francis grasped the opportunity to write, Come my dear, have courage! ... We know that your husband was kind and gracious to those who had wounded or offended him. He will be very happy to see us acting in the same manner... What shall I say of our new Spouse? What meekness He practised toward those who put Him to death and that, not by accident, but through malice! How pleasing it will be to Him if we do the same!

Jane was still not ready to forgive, and Francis waited. But in 1606, when an agitated Jane complained to Francis that the relatives were trying again to arrange for a meeting between M. d'Anlezy and her, Francis responded, I do not mean that you should seek a meeting with M. d'Anlezy, but I wish you to be condescending toward those that desire to procure it, and to testify that you love everything, yes, even your husband's death, for the love of your sweet Savior. Courage, my child, let us practice these rough and humiliating, but solid, holy, and excellent virtues.

Jane obeyed and after more counseling from Francis even consented to be godmother to d'Anlezy's new-born child. After six years of widowhood and deep inner struggle, Jane was ready to let go. She finally did so!

If Francis and Jane were living today, he probably would have suggested her dialoging with this anger and fear which prevented her from forgiving d'Anlezy for so many years. I believe this would be Francis' advice to any of us who, at present, are clutching onto past hurts. For modern psychology advises us to make friends with our shadows, i.e., with the negative feelings and thoughts stemming from past hurts that continue to haunt us. Dialogue with these negative feelings will dissipate their force. Recognizing their influence in our lives will force us to admit our dependence on God. Eventually their influence will dwindle perhaps to nothing. For when we learn how to befriend our negative feelings and to see beyond them to our true selves, we discover that we are, at the core, lovable. We begin to recognize more and more that God indeed loves us. There is a Zen saying, "Face reality and unwillful change will take place." If we are willing to see ourselves as we are while simultaneously holding onto the fact that we are loved deeply by God, then much effortless change will become possible. Our shadow will become a friend.

Instead of speaking about a dialogue with our feelings, Francis spoke about God's movements or inspirations within us. Inspirations are a sign of God's love for us, like friendly messages which He

sends to awaken us, to enlighten our understanding, and to give us the strength to want to do and actually to do what is good. In Francis' own words, By inspirations we mean all those interior attractions, movements, acts of self-reproach and sorrow, lights and insights that God works in us predisposing our hearts by his blessings and by his fatherly care and love so as to awaken, nudge, urge and attract us to holy virtues, heavenly love, and good resolutions – in short, to everything that hastens us on our way to eternal happiness.

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Whether we dialogue with our feelings or respond to God's inspirations, healing of life's hurts can be ours. For just as preoccupation with past hurts and nostalgia can block our sensitivity to the present, so too can seeking control by staring ahead into the future. We are tempted to waste opportunities for taking responsibility for our lives by projecting into the future instead of living in "the now." If we are unaware and unappreciative of the now, much potential appreciation of self, others, and the experiences of life are passed over. There is a story of some people on a scenic trip through the Alps who were traveling with the shades drawn to keep out the sun. They experienced nothing of the beauty around them. We too pass through life without ever really living because we spend our time either rehashing the past or manipulating the future. We are never where life is — in the present! As Robert Wicks says: Being in the now offers us freedom from anxiety and an opportunity to experience God in refreshing new ways. It is only when we move into the future without God that we experience anxiety. Spiritually, being in the now is essential because it is the only place that the living God is present to us. The past may be sacred, the future may hold great graces, but a sensitive encounter with God is in the present moment.

Francis phrases it this way in his letter of July 1603 to Mademoiselle de Soulfour Let us have no care about tomorrow. Let us think only of living today well, and when tomorrow comes, it also will be today and we can think about it then. In all this we must have great trust and resignation to God's providence. We must make provision for enough manna for the day, and no more. Let us not doubt that God will provide more for us tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and all the days of our pilgrimage.

For Francis, being in the present is synonymous with being in God's presence. He says to Jane in a letter written in January 1610, Let us really love God, my daughter, and let us not start examining in detail what we are doing for love of God, as long as we know that we never want to do anything except for love of Him. For my part, I think we remain in God's presence even while we are asleep,

because we fall asleep in His sight, as He pleases, and according to His will...and when we wake up, we find Him still there, close by.

In two letters to Madame de Flechere Francis wrote first in May 1608, Don't be disturbed about your imperfections, and always have the courage to pick yourself up after a fall. I'm very glad to hear that you make a fresh start each day. There's no better way of growing toward perfection in the spiritual life than to be always starting over again and never thinking that we have done enough.

Then in January 1609, he wrote to her again saying: O dear daughter, don't be examining yourself to see if what you are doing is little or much, good or bad, provided that it is not sinful and that, in all good faith, you are trying to do it for God. As much as possible, do well what you have to do, and once it is done, think no more about it but turn your attention to what has to be done next. Walk very simply along the way our Lord shows you and don't worry. What is Francis telling us here? First, we are going to fall, yes repeatedly, but that is human nature and all we need do is to accept God's forgiveness and courageously to start over again. Second, while we concentrate on doing everything for the love of God, we leave the success or failure of our actions to God's mercy, and we never worry! Third, we live anchored in the present moment, confident of God's presence in this moment. Of course, the awareness of being in God's presence is at its height during prayer and indeed is prayer.

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