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*St. Francis de Sales’  
“Spiritual Directory” for a New Century  
Re-Interpreting the “Direction of Intention”*

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**The "Spiritual Directory": A Key to Francis' "Method" for the Spiritual Life**

The writings of St. Francis de Sales in connection with the founding of the Visitation order include a series of “shorter works” (*opuscules*) gathered by St. Jane de Chantal and the early Visitandines into what came to be called the “Custom Book.” Among the pieces preserved in this “Custom Book” were a series of “Directories,” including “The Spiritual Directory for daily actions.”<sup>1</sup> St. Francis intended this “Spiritual Directory” for use by all Visitandines; but “It was regarded as especially helpful for formation in the novitiate.”<sup>2</sup>

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[1] “Directoire des choses spirituelles” in Saint Francis de Sales, *Oeuvres de saint Francois de Sales, Eveque de Geneve et Docteur de l’Eglise*. Edition complete (Annecy: Religieuses de la Visitation, 1893-1963), vol. 25 (*Opuscules, Cinquieme Serie –La Visitation*), p. 137-175. A popular edition for lay people has been published by Lewis S. Fiorelli, O.S.F.S., *Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales: Reflections for the Laity* (Boston, Massachusetts: St. Paul Editions, 1985)

[2] Edward J. Carney, O.S.F.S., “The Spiritual Directory of St. Francis de Sales: A Question of Authorship.” *The Communicator* (Newsletter of the Institute of Salesian Studies), vol. 1, No 3 (Hyattsville, Maryland, 1971), p.5, ft.26.

Such a “Spiritual Directory for daily actions” had the purpose of maintaining a sense of God’s presence throughout the day, and infusing one’s ordinary activities with a spirit of prayer and communion with God. The “articles” in this Spiritual Directory for the Visitation focus on the various moments in the routine of each day—rising, meditation, meals, the chanting of the Office, recreation, and so forth. Francis suggests pious thoughts and appropriate quotes from the scriptures for each activity. He intersperses these thoughts and scripture quotes with descriptions of the correct attitude and spirit that one should bring to each activity.

A study of Francis’ style of spiritual direction demonstrates that the preparation of such a “Spiritual Directory for daily actions” fits very well with his usual method and approach. When he was studying law at the University of Padua, Francis prepared a short guidebook to regulate his own spiritual life. This came to be known as the Rule of Padua. Fr. Edward Carney, O.S.F.S., points out.

This youthful practice of writing and following a rule influenced Francis in his spiritual direction of other people in the years of his priesthood. For example, on August 26 or 27, 1604, he gave to Madame de Chantal written directions on how to pass the day well.<sup>3</sup>

Further letters of Madame de Chantal and to others who sought his direction provide additional evidence of this practice of Francis in his guidance of those who came to him for advice.

Francis wrote this “Spiritual Directory” that we find today as part of the Visitation “Custom Book” toward the end of his life. Although written specifically for the first Visitandines, this Spiritual Directory represents a distillation into a brief and compact form the fruits of Francis’ many years of experience and wisdom in living the Christian life and in guiding and directing others in that same endeavor. This “Spiritual Directory” thus holds a unique place among Francis’ writings. It provides a privileged access to the style and method of this great spiritual master.

One branch in particular of the Salesian family has focused on the “Spiritual Directory” as having special importance for their identity and unique character. This branch includes the two Congregations founded by Fr. Louis Brisson, Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, and St. Leonie Aviat in Troyes, France, during the latter part of the nineteenth century. These include the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales (1867) and Oblates (Fathers and Brother) of St. Francis de Sales (1875).<sup>4</sup> The *Constitutions* of the Oblates (Fathers and Brother), for example, states at the outset the crucial place that this “Spiritual Directory” has for their life and identity:

The particular charism of the Congregation is the spirit of St. Francis de Sales, and the privileged means of acquiring this spirit is the *Spiritual Directory* for daily actions. The faithful practice of the *Directory* has been prescribed for the Oblates by Father Frisson as their specific means of

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[3] Ibid., p. 1.

[4] A popular biography of Fr. Brisson by Katherine Burton (*So Much, So Soon: Father Brisson, Founder of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales* [New York: Benzinger Brother, 1952]) gives a brief description of this life and the events that led to his founding of these two religious orders in collaboration with St. Leonie Aviat and the Visitation nun, Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis.

retracing in themselves the image of St. Francis de Sales, who was himself an image of Our Lord.<sup>5</sup>

### **The “Direction of Intention”: The Heart of Francis’ *Spiritual Directory***

Fr. Brisson adapted the “Spiritual Directory” from the Visitation “Custom Book” for use by the members of his two Congregations. In this adapted form, the first portion of it (“Article I”) has the title, “Rising and Direction of Intention.” It is the so-called “Direction of Intention” in particular that I wish to focus on. I would argue that it gives us unique insight into Francis’ approach to living our daily Christian life. Further, I intend to show how this “Direction on Intention” has particular relevance for followers of Francis’ teachings on the spiritual life in our contemporary world.

The text of Francis’ instruction concerning the “Direction of Intention,” as prepared for the Oblates by Fr. Brisson, reads as follows:

*The Oblates who wish to thrive and advance in the way of Our Lord should, at the beginning of their actions, both exterior and interior, ask for his grace and offer to his divine goodness all the good that they will do. In this way they will be prepared to bear with peace and serenity all the pain and suffering they will encounter as coming from the fatherly hand of our good God and Savior. His most holy intention is to have them merit by such means in order to reward them afterwards out of the abundance of his love.*

*They should not neglect this practice in matters which are small and seemingly insignificant, nor even if they are engaged in those things which are agreeable and in complete conformity with their own will and needs, such as drinking, eating, resting, recreating and similar actions. By following the advice of the Apostle, everything they do will be done in God’s name to please him alone.[6]*

One can sense immediately the importance of this passage and the reason for its presence almost at the very beginning of the “Spiritual Directory.” The Direction of Intention does not concern any action in particular. Rather, it provides the attitude and approach that one should bring toward every action, even “matters which are small and seemingly insignificant.” Fr. Roger Balducelli comments:

While the Directory as a whole gives directions concerning various exercises to be done, the direction of intention prescribes the pre-intending of all our actions and exercises in relation to

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[5] *The Constitutions, The General Statutes, and The Spiritual Directory of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales* (Wilmington, Delaware: DeSales Publishing, 1991), Constitution #14, p. 21.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 192-3. The translation follows almost word for word the original French text; the only change is the replacement of “the Sisters (les Soeurs)” by “the Oblates” at the beginning. “The Apostle” mentioned is St. Paul; see 1 Corinthians 10:31 and Colossians 3:17. Various “formulas” for making this “direction of intention” are suggested on p. 252. The shortest one reads: “My God, give me your grace. I offer you all the good I shall do in this action and all the pain and suffering to be found in it. Amen.”

God. Thus it is not, in itself, an exercise in the customary sense, but a stylization of the process, the process through which deeds are done.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, Fr. Balducelli points out that the English term “Direction of Intention” does not adequately describe this “pre-intending of all our actions and exercises in relation to God.” Rather, “The right Intending of Deeds” represents the more accurate name:

Older French titles betray... the correct perception of the content. Article I of the Revised Text is entitled “...and the Rightness of the Intention.” : Rightness” (“droiture”) is accurate, for what the Directory prescribes is a “rightness” that should be impressed on intentions...<sup>8</sup>

### **Francis’ Strategy in the “Direction of Intention” (or “Right Intending of Deeds”)**

When he prefaced his “Spiritual Directory for daily actions’ with this opening section on “The Right Intending of Deeds,” Francis had in mind the entire variety of actions that engage our time and attention in the course of every day. These include even the most ordinary and mundane activities “such as drinking, eating, resting, recreating and similar action.” By consciously intending each action “for God’s glory,” “... everything they do will be done in God’s name and to please him alone.”

In other words, Francis explains the purpose of this “intending” as a way for the individual to live the “devout life” and reach heaven: “His (God’s) most holy intention is to have them merit by such means in order to reward them afterwards out of the abundance of his love.” Francis focuses almost entirely on the individual and his or her growth in holiness, their advancement in prayer and in living a virtuous life. The person’s attention is constantly directed to God’s presence in the midst of their daily round of activities.

But Francis does not seem to place much emphasis on the nature of the actions themselves, their broader impact on others and on the wider world, and their potential in helping to create a more just and peaceful human community. As I have written in an earlier article:

The overriding emphasis in Francis’ writings seems to be on personal conversion or change. There appears to be very little which might address the larger questions of social justice and the challenge to followers of Jesus today to work for the structural changes essential to bring about a genuine transformation of society.<sup>9</sup>

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[7] Roger Balducelli, O.S.F.S., *a Commentary on the Directory of St. Francis de Sales*, Chapter V “On Intention,” p. 66 (private printing; Chapter V is dated March 25, 1973).

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 66. He continues, “Likewise, the phrase ‘dresser son intention’ that appears in other French editions is quite correct. “Dresser” means in this context “to tend to, to fashion, to process.” And this is precisely what the precept describes” (p.66-7)

[9] Anthony R. Ceresko, O.S.F.S., “A Hermeneutical Strategy for a Liberationist Interpretation of St. Francis de Sales,” *Vidyajoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 63/1 (January 1999), p. 37-46, see p. 37. Reprinted in *Room for All: Insights for the Millennium* (edited by John Sankarathil. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2000) p. 164-76, see p. 164.

## A Modern Spirituality of Daily Human Activity

The Second Vatican Council marked a sea change in our appreciation of the wider web of interconnectedness that entangles each of our actions as human beings living in the modern “global village.” Even the most ordinary actions, such as drinking a cup of coffee or turning a light switch on or off, links us with an entire, even world wide, network of social, political, and economic factors. Each action in some way possesses the possibility of moving this world and our human community toward a better, more life-enhancing direction of ever deeper into chaos and death. Modern thinkers and theologians such as Karl Rahner and Teilhard de Chardin have seized on the significance of this wider scope of our actions as individual human beings. They have also pointed out the theological implications. Over and above our “personal advancement in holiness,” each of our actions also involves us in God’s creative and salvific purpose for humankind and for the universe.

In his essay on “Christian Living Formerly and Today,” for instance, Karl Rahner outlines the kind of piety appropriate for post-Vatican II Catholics:

Vatican II exhorts Christians to consider their task in the world of today, to cooperate with all in the construction of a greater freer world, one more worthy of mankind, to take responsibility and not merely to ask how man should act in a given case in order to avoid offending God, but to ask what man can do in order to make life worth living.<sup>10</sup>

Rahner highlights the social and political dimensions of this new way of understanding our daily activities in the context of our Christian vocation:

The Christian cannot simply dismiss politics as a ‘dirty business’, and expect God to give this ‘dirty business’ to others to carry out and not to him, so that he himself can pursue his own quiet devotions in the comfort of the petit bourgeois.<sup>11</sup>

Teilhard de Chardin expresses a similar understanding of this wider, all encompassing concept of the Christian vocation in more poetic language. He describes “the relationship between natural and supernatural actions in the world” as follows:

Any increase that I can confer upon myself or upon things is translated into some increase in my power to love and some progress in Christ’s blessed hold upon the universe. Our work appears to us in the main as a way of earning our daily bread. But its essential virtue is of a higher order: through it again we augment in some sense, in relation to ourselves, the divine end of that union, Our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

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[10] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Volume VII: Further Theology of the Spiritual Life I (translated by David Bourke; London/New York: Darton, Longman and Todd/Herder and Herder, 1971), p 18.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 19

[12] Pere Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p.32

In its Pastoral Constitution on “The Church in the Modern World,” the Second Vatican Council echoes these sentiments of De Chardin. The Council Fathers recognize the wider web of interconnectedness of which even the most ordinary of our daily actions form a part:

Believers are agreed that individual and collective human activity, the massive endeavor of humanity throughout history to improve the conditions of life, corresponds in principle to God’s design. Created in god’s image, humankind was commissioned to subdue the earth and all it contains, to rule the world in justice and holiness, and, recognizing God as the creator of all things, to refer itself and the totality of things to God so that, with everything subject to God, the divine name would be admired through all the earth.

This also applies to everyday activities. Men and women who are providing for themselves and their families, and are thus performing an appropriate service in society, can rightly regard themselves as furthering the creator’s work by their labour, as being concerned for the well being of their fellows and as making a personal contribution to the achievement of the divine plan in history...

The Christian message is seen, then, not as discouraging them from building the world, or as leading them to neglect the well being of their fellows, but as strictly obliging them to this as their duty.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the artist who sculpts a beautiful statue, the teacher who helps the child learn to read, the engineer who builds a sturdier and safer bridge, the scientist who discovers a better cure for some feared illness, all play a part in moving the world toward the blessed end for which God created it. All the more ought believers to keep before their eyes the focus and goal of their daily actions. All of our deeds, in one way or another, can contribute to or hinder the accomplishment of the creator’s will for the world, the coming to be of the New Jerusalem envisioned by the prophet of the Apocalypse:

Then I saw anew heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more....And I heard a loud voice from the throne proclaiming,

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them as their God;  
They will be his peoples,  
And God himself will be with them;  
He will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
Mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
For the first things have passed away.”<sup>14</sup>*

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[13] From paragraph 34 (“The Value of Human Activity”) of “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*),” *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume Two, Trent to Vatican II* (Edited by Norman P. Tanner: London/Washington, D.C.: Sheed and Ward/Georgetown University Press, 1990), p. 1089-90.

[14] Revelation 21: 1-4 (*New Revised Standard Version*). See also the “utopian” visions described in Isaiah 11:1-9 and 25:6-10a.

## The Modern Concern for Justice and Liberation

A deep confidence in the potential for human creativity and genius to foster progress and to create a better world inspired the optimism and hope that characterizes the writings of de Chardin and the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. That optimism and hope enabled them to catch a glimpse of the way that life in this world can and should be lived. Their vision of what is possible for our human community fired the imagination and enthusiasm of Catholics and people of good will everywhere.

In more recent times, however, liberation theologians and others have tempered this optimism and hope. They have made us aware of the many injustices that plague our world today and the widespread poverty that results in suffering and death for so many inhabitants of our earth. These injustices result from the oppressive and exploitative character of the structures of power: the imbalances built into our economic system, for example, and the exclusion of so many from the processes of decision-making about things that affect their daily lives and futures.<sup>15</sup>

The elimination of poverty and an end to these injustices can only come through changes in the economic, political, and social arrangements in our society. All of us in one way or another are caught up in the webs created by these power structures. Thus we have come to learn that the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus calls for not only a personal *metanoia*, a change of heart by each individual. The coming to be of that kingdom demands also changes in these unjust structures and arrangements that encourage and even reward greed, exploitation, and oppression. The Indian biblical theologian, George Soares-Prabhu, has proved a clear description of the two-fold nature of our task as followers of Jesus today:

The Kingdom [of God] thus calls for a change of hearts and a change of structures. A change of hearts without a change of structures... will leave present oppression unchanged. A change of structures without a change of hearts will lead to new oppression, as the 'liberated' oppressed are driven by the as yet unexorcised demons of selfishness and greed that possess them to become oppressors in their turn. Only the two together can shape the world in which there will be neither oppressor nor oppressed, because men have learnt to live together without exploiting one another in fellowship and freedom.<sup>16</sup>

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[15] See, for example, Felix Wilfred, "Church's Commitment to the Poor in the Age of Globalization. *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 62/2 (February 1998), p. 79-95. More recently, Wilfred ("The agenda of the Victims: The Poor Explore the Hopes for a New Century," *Jeevadhara: A journal of Christian Interpretation*, vol. 31, no. 175 {January 2000}, p. 7-28 has noted, "How much we have really become human is the disturbing question of the victims at the dawn of the new century. The century that has elapsed could boast of many achievements so human ingenuity. All these may give the false image of humanity in continuous progress. We come to the sober realization of where we are when we look at the misery and destitution that characterize the life of the majority of the people on the globe. Year after year, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) comes out with disconcerting facts about the scandalous inequality that characterize our world and our societies. As long as this situation continues, no one can really talk of real progress" (p. 15). Wilfred cites in his footnote the *Human Development Report*, 1999, 1998, Oxford University Press, Delhi: *Human Development Report* 1997, Oxford University Press, New York.

[16] George M. Soares-Prabhu, S.J., *The Kingdom of God, Jesus' Vision of a New Society* (Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1981), p. 29.

## A Two-Fold focus for the “Right Intending” of Our Deeds

In the past, disciples of St. Francis de Sales have stressed the possibilities for the Direction of Intention as a means of personal transformation and advancement in the ways of God. Through the “right intending” of our actions, “God becomes established in (our) inner space as a constant, unbroken and all-encompassing presence.”<sup>17</sup> However, as I have pointed out in the previous section, we need to expand the understanding of our daily activities and take into account their impact on the wider world in which we live. Each of our actions has some effect, for good or ill, on other people, the physical world, and the wider web of institutions and arrangements in which we have a role as members of the human community and as inhabitants of the physical universe. Thus the “right intending” of each action must also take into account this external dimension. “Bringing God into the picture” is not enough if we limit it simply to fostering the awareness of God’s presence in our “inner space.” We should examine each action’s “rightness” and potential for advancing “Christ’s blessed hold upon the universe” in the wider external world as well.

One can see how such a program for pursuing Christian perfection would lead us constantly to examine and evaluate the various aspects of their lives—family, work, leisure activities, and our commitments in the political, economic, and social spheres. Through a “right intending” of our deeds, God becomes not only the constant companion in our everyday actions. God and God’s plan for our world and our human community becomes more explicitly the end and goal of everything in which we are engaged. Our personal transformation in terms of a closer union with God in prayer and in awareness of God’s presence in each action is joined to the potential of these deeds to achieve a transformation of human society and the creation of a more just and peaceful human community. In the words of de Chardin, “God is inexhaustibly attained in the *totality* of our actions.”<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Someone who reads the writings of St. Francis de Sales without a knowledge of his life and activities could misinterpret them as fostering an individualistic and privatized kind of piety. But one must see Francis’ works on the spiritual life against the background of his deep involvement in the issues and events of his day. He was fully engaged as a public figure: bishop, author, founder, reformer, diplomat – and saint.<sup>19</sup> Seen in this light, one can appreciate much more the genius of his approach to the spiritual life: its concreteness, practicality, simplicity, and attractiveness. It is well suited to infuse a spirit of prayer and commitment to Gospel values into the “busy-ness” of daily life filled with the distractions that so easily fragment our attention and obscure our sense of direction and purpose.

But Francis was a man of his day. He was certainly not a “liberation theologian” in the modern sense of the term, nor did he raise questions about the social order of his day. Nonetheless, as

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[17] Balducelli, *A Commentary on the Directory*, p. 69.

[18] *The Divine Milieu*, p. 32.

[19] See E.J. Lajeunie, O.P., *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, The Thinker, His Influence*, (2 vols.; translated by Rory O’Sullivan, O.S.F.S.; Bangalore: S.F.S. Publications, 1986).

“classic texts” on the spiritual life, his writings possess a “surplus of meaning.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, when readers in later times and cultural situations come to Francis’ writings with different backgrounds and different questions, these writings are able to speak to them in new ways and yield new meanings and insights. Such meanings and insights may go beyond the original intention of the author or the understanding of his audience. But the text itself is open to such reinterpretation and broadening of its meaning. In words of John Chethimattam, “...the classical religious texts are said to have always an excess meaning, that is, they mean more than they actually meant.”<sup>21</sup> As long as these new readings do not betray or distort Francis’ thought, they represent a legitimate development and extension of his insights and ideas.

This explains something of what I have been doing in rereading this classic text of Francis’ *Spiritual Directory* and in particular the passage on the “right intending” of one’s deeds. I have shown how the genius of Francis and the potentially transforming character of his spirituality manifest themselves here at the heart of his approach to daily Christian life. This focus on the “right intending” of our daily actions is open to a widening of its scope beyond dimly the internal attitudes that can transform us into new creatures. We can also “rightly intend” these actions, aware of their potential to transform our society and world as well. In this way we can bring together and integrate the two dimensions of our life as human beings, the internal and the external, into a single, Kingdom-oriented effort: the internal awareness of God’s constant presence with us and the external aiming of our efforts toward creating a more just and peaceful human community.

Let me conclude by proposing a reworking of the formula for the “Direction of Intention” that takes into account this new way of understanding it:

*My God, give me your grace. I offer you all the good that I shall do in this action and all the pain and suffering to be found in it. Stay close to me and help me to see how what I am doing can advance “Christ’s blessed hold upon the universe.” Amen.*<sup>22</sup>

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[20] Ceresko, “A Hermeneutical Strategy,” p. 38-40. See also Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University, 1976).

[21] John B. Chethimattam, “Religion the Cutting Edge of Culture,” *Jeevadhara: A Journal of Christian Interpretation*, vol. XXXI, Nos. 184 & 185 (July & September 2001), p. 349-65, see p. 363.

[22] See above, footnote 6.