

America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

15 Minutes to Let God Lead

Walking with Francis de Sales and Ignatius Loyola

By Thomas B. Curran | OCTOBER 15, 2007



A clock outside my office chimes every 15 minutes. Each quarter hour, I am reminded of how a particular meeting is progressing, how much longer until my next appointment. An old family heirloom, this clock serves as one of the threads connecting my formation in the Salesian world with my more recent experiences in the Ignatian cosmos.

I am a member of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, an international congregation of priests and brothers whose purpose is to spread the charism of St. Francis de Sales. We do this in a variety of ministries but primarily in schools, missions, parishes and on military bases. We are part of a Salesian family that includes the Visitation Sisters, the Salesians of Don Bosco, the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales and the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales.

So what is a member of Oblates of St. Francis de Sales doing in a Jesuit university? During my first year as the president of Rockhurst University, a Jesuit institution, I have met many people who ask: "So, I understand that you are not a Jesuit?" Others, when they discover that I live with the Kansas City Jesuit community, playfully inquire, "How are you surviving with all those Jesuits?"

My responses to both questions are positive ones. I politely try to reintroduce myself, explaining that I prefer to identify myself by who I am (a De Sales oblate) rather than by who I am not (a Jesuit). Most questioners then proceed to inquire about St. Francis de Sales and my congregation. To the question about how am I surviving with all those Jesuits, I respond, "Very well." Why wouldn't that be the case? St. Francis de Sales had much of his early training and formation with the Jesuits; he cherished his Jesuit education in Paris; and the Jesuits who instructed him hoped that he would join their ranks. While his theology is Augustinian and Thomistic, Francis de Sales's spiritual practices are rooted in his Ignatian formation. He made the Spiritual Exercises and consulted a Jesuit as his spiritual director until his death.

One might say that Francis de Sales was a "man for others." A civil and church lawyer, he became the bishop of Geneva, where he encountered violent Calvinists in a post-Reformation era. Unlike Ignatius Loyola, de Sales did not have military training, though he was trained as a swordsman. Nevertheless, he engaged the hostile opposition with charity and gentleness, which earned him the appellation "the gentleman saint." His motto was "gentle and firm" (*suaviter et fortiter*). De Sales engaged the Calvinists through the use of pamphlets and instructions that he wrote by hand and distributed throughout the region. His prolific and persuasive writings, found to be without error, later led to his being named one of 33 doctors of the church and the patron saint of writers.

Walking With Ignatius and Francis

Were the Society of Jesus to be dissolved, Ignatius once conjectured, it would take him 15 minutes of prayer to reconcile himself. Francis de Sales was once asked how long he went without being aware of the presence of God; his response, too, was 15 minutes. For both masters, "abandonment" and "holy indifference" capture how they lived their lives and instructed those who follow them. To put it bluntly, each will "spot" us 15 minutes to get refocused on letting God lead us and not vice versa.

As a university president, I struggle to keep up with the correspondence my position requires. I marvel at the amount of time that each of these two masters made for writing letters of instruction and spiritual direction, and I aspire to do something similar. Ignatius wrote close to 7,000 letters in a 16-year period as superior general of the Society of Jesus. Francis de Sales's writings fill 28 volumes, 12 of which include letters to those to whom he was giving spiritual direction. He also found time to write [*The Introduction to the Devout Life*](#) and [*Two Treatises on the Love of God*](#).

Ignatius' foundational principles can be found in his [*Spiritual Exercises*](#); Francis de Sales's are in his [*Spiritual Directory*](#). In these works and in their other writings, one finds a holistic approach to holiness, rooted in a psychology that recognizes the feelings and affect of life. Ignatius' approach attempts to draw out one's desires, hopes and dreams through the use of imagination. Francis de Sales's strong sensory approach can be seen in his abundant use of poetry and natural history to describe how one understands and experiences God.

Both men wanted all people to pursue holiness. They rejected the notion that holiness was restricted to those entering monasteries, seminaries and convents. Instead, they were convinced

that all people can find God in the world without necessarily being of the world. Their approach was validated in the Second Vatican Council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," which focused on the universal call to holiness.

So what is a member of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales doing in a Jesuit university? Partnering with the Jesuits and lay colleagues in building up the kingdom of God. In Jesuit institutions we pursue doing "all for the greater glory of God." For Salesians, it's a matter of doing the ordinary extraordinarily well, which involves the practice of the little virtues of charity, gentleness, humility and meekness. We say we try to "live Jesus." Like hand and glove, the Ignatian and Salesian approaches complement one another.

Be Who You Are

Francis de Sales instructs us to "be who you are and be it well." I recall this especially when asked if I would ever consider becoming a Jesuit. I contend that my selection to be president by the Jesuits and trustees was based on my being who I am and being it well. Who I am also explains why I am comfortable living with the Kansas City Jesuits. I do not need to be a Jesuit to participate in Jesuit ministries.

As a community of students, faculty and staff, we have an opportunity to make God's good world better, a goal consistent with the Ignatian idea that all are called to be co-creators. This does not mean that we act impetuously or without reflection. Ignatius and Francis de Sales both stress the importance of setting aside time daily to reflect on where one has met God and where one has avoided God. For both saints, this means "living in the present moment."

Francis de Sales also recommends a thorough, annual, spiritual self-examination, which he likens to the need "to remove the rust and dust" in one's clock or watch so that it can be wound up for daily devotion to God. After one year as president of Rockhurst, I understand now more than ever that my office clock and my heart both need to keep well those quarter hours. After all, I have but 15 minutes to get focused on letting God lead.

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