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THE RELEVANCE OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES METHODS FOR TODAY'S COMMUNICATION WORLD

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Abstract

We live in the modern world with all its forces and splendors, achievements and success, developments and growth. Today human beings can do anything with the possibilities of their own inventions. Technologically, scientifically, and materially humanity has reached the peak of glory as never before. All of creation is potentially a mediator of divine disclosure, but the church is the community which possesses the greatest potential for communication about God. According to Avery Dulles, the church exists in order to bring men into communion with God and there by open up to communication with each other. This task is called with various names as mission, evangelization, or education. If we are committed to these statements, then, surely we will be available to carry out the task that Jesus has entrusted to his disciples.

Hence, this research may help the readers to be firm, like the great gentle saint, St Francis de Sales, who lived in the seventeenth century and made a great history in his life, by taking God's word to the people in his milieu. He could do it with the availability of resources. He spoke of God in such tones of love that the hearts of the hearers were touched. People accepted his faith and were moved to love God more earnestly and sincerely than before. His sermons and his writings were in fact the expressions of what he had experienced deeply within himself, an intimate personal relationship with his Lord and master. So this thesis can be very helpful for the readers to know the value about the media and its advantages to proclaim the Lord's message to the entire humanity. Let the legacy of St Francis de Sales be rooted and be continued by everyone.

Key words: Relevance, communication, Christian Mission.

Introduction

This paper deals about the relevance of St Francis' methods of communication in defending God's love among Christians and other dominations. Communicating God's love among the faithful and non-Christians is our bounden duty especially those who are chosen for it. The problem is this: those who are commissioned to preach may not have the genuine experience about God that they can convincingly preach about it; or those who have genuine experience about God may not make use of the methods of communication or what they may follow may be faulty and consequently ineffectual. How to make it a meaningful and joyful sharing of one's own life of faith to others? He is the model preacher who lived what he preached and preached effectively what he lived. In this chapter we see St Francis De Sales as a model of communicator and his view on communicating God's message to everyone.

Francis spoke of God in such tones of love that hearts of the hearers were touched; they accepted the preacher's faith and were moved to love God more earnestly and sincerely than before. His sermons were in fact the expressions of what he had experienced deeply within himself; an intimate personal relationship with his Lord and master. His hearers testify that there were times when his faces would be aglow with divine light and fervour. And he was open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

St Francis de Sales – A Short Life Sketch

Early Years

Francis de Sales was born at Thorens, into the noble De Sales family of the Duchy of Savoy, on 21 August, 1567 in France. His father was François de Sales, Lord of Boisy, Sales, and his mother was Françoise de Sionnaz, He was baptized as Francis Bonaventura, after two great Franciscan saints. He was the eldest of six brothers. His father intended him for the magistracy and sent him at an early age to the colleges of La Roche and Annecy. From 1583 till 1588 he studied rhetoric and humanities at the college of Clermont, Paris, under the care of the Jesuits. While being there he followed a course of theology. After a terrible and prolonged temptation to despair, caused by the discussions of the theologians of the day on the question of predestination, from which he was suddenly freed as he knelt before a miraculous image of Our Lady at St. Etienne-des-Grès and made an act of total surrender. And then he made a vow of chastity and consecrated himself to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In 1588 he studied law at Padua, where the Jesuit Father Possevin was his spiritual director. He received his diploma of doctorate from the famous Pancirolo in 1592. Having been admitted as a lawyer before the senate of Chambéry, he was about to be appointed as a senator. His father had selected one of the noblest heiresses of Savoy to be the partner of his future life, but Francis declared his intention of embracing the ecclesiastical life.

Contribution of St Francis in the Communication World

St Francis de Sales a Creative Evangelizer

“The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.”(MK 1:15) Jesus Christ, the word made flesh was the new, first and greatest evangelizer. His vocation was to proclaim salvation, the kingdom of God, which was manifested through his words and deeds. During his earthly life, he called His disciples to have a personal encounter with Him and to share in his mission of preaching the gospel to the whole nation. The missionary mandate of preaching the Gospel, which the Church received, has now become much more complicated than in the past because of the radical changes in circumstances, society, and culture. It calls for assuming new forms of proclaiming the Gospel today, especially for those under the influence of fast growing trend of secularization. Therefore the Church, being in an era of New-evangelization needs firstly to renew her experiences of faith in Christ and secondly to proclaim it depending on the places and situations. For us, the missionaries, St. Francis de Sales has always remained a model of new evangelization for his unique way of living his Christian faith and creative way of transmitting to others the same.

Francis de Sales was a man of faith, whose sanctity is both attractive, because, he is very human and possesses an intensively intimate feel of God, his sanctity is radiant, generous and hospitable. He is challenging because he is inviting everyone.

A Man of Great Humanness

Francis was perfectly human. Even four centuries after his birth, we really find someone today who can reach such a degree of humanness. Francis de Sales based all his human qualities on the Love of God. He considered the love of God as a goal, the crowning point. Just as God revealed himself in charity, Francis lived a life of other centeredness. Francis dealt with all without the distinction of age, nobility or poverty. He always preferred to be informal. To one of his spiritual daughters he wrote as to how to write letters to Him- “write to me freely, sincerely, and simply. In your letter do not put ‘Monsignor’ or any other form. It’s enough to put ‘Father’, for, I am a man without ceremonies.”¹ As a man who is free and open, simple and quiet spontaneous in expression, Francis de Sales, embodied a sense of respect and reserve. Thus, Francis considered no one as unimportant. He always kept human solidarity with others which led him to reflect deeply on practical charity.² Francis welcomed every sort of person with a gracious and kind face and friendly words, so that even though he was most serious and even majestic in his bearing, no one was afraid of going up to him and pouring out all their trouble with absolute confidence. And it was unheard of anyone to have come away disappointed.

¹ A. Mookenthottam, “*Human Touch in St Francis de Sales, Visakhapatnam*”, SFS, 1982, p.25.

² E. Stopp. ed., *St Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St Chantal*, pp.67-68.

The Method of Communication Used by St Francis de Sales

The communication method used by Francis in this world was such as his own life style, good examples, virtues of life, preaching writing etc.” During the course of the sixteenth century, in the context of extreme wave of pagan and heretical thought clashing with a counter wave of mystical and exaggeratedly ascetical thought and a conflict between natural and the desire to get to heaven, necessarily needed the combined strength of a religious, a saint and an educated man of a world.³” “His well versed knowledge in both secular and sacred sciences blended with a virtuous life – style formulated a new ideal that integrated earthly culture and deep Christianity that harmonised humanism with Catholicism. That blended one’s duties on earth with surrender to God.”⁴

Task of Francis through the Basic Media

The type of media that was prevalent during St Francis’ time was not as quick, easy, affordable and technological as we see today. And yet, he was a man who used the best means to communicate with the utmost fervour. He was a very good writer, who also loved writing letters, books and pamphlets. His messages goes very strong to the faithful, to the heretics, to those who were disturbed in life and those who were in need of his constant help especially in spiritual direction.

Personal Contact

St Francis de Sales was a person easily approachable and easy to talk too. His door was always open for the people and servants. He welcomed everyone with the expressions of friendliness. Anyone who encountered him felt great and happy. His manner of speaking had great dignity and discretion in spite of being humble, quiet and candid. He never spoke offensively to anyone nor did he jeer at people in a hurtful way. Even as he walked through the streets everybody was delighted to have blessed by him.⁵ “He visited the sick, the poor and imprisoned. He had a confessional set up close to the door of the cathedral on the Gospel side so that people could easily approach it. His knowledge of cannon law, civil law and theology came handy for the service of the people.”⁶

Sermons

Francis had a great plan and majestic appearance with well formed, attractive expressions and a solid voice which led his teachers and his regent give him a chance to give speeches.⁷ He never had a heart to refuse when asked for a sermon. His sermons contained everything, profound learning, unusual symphony born of true understanding, natural eloquence, a vigorous yet dignified delivery, but above all an intense earnestness

³ J.F. Cassidy, *Francis de Sales The Doctor of Devotion*, Dublin, M.H.Gill and son, 1948, p. 31.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ E. Stopp, ed., *St Francis da Sales : A Testimony by St Chantal*, pp.138-141.

⁶ A. Mookenthottam, *Saint Francis de Sales a Formative Biography*, pp.88-89.

⁷ B. Mackey, “*Saint Francis de Sales a preacher: A Study*” *Indian Journal of Spirituality*, no. 2, 1991, p.130.

and personal sanctity. The preaching ministry of Francis was very powerful. He valued oral words more than written ones, as he would say that, “the words on the lips are alive and on the paper they are dead.” The words are more effective and easier to handle, and what he preached brought out the spirit of life.⁸

Letter writing

Spiritual direction through letter writing was very common with St Francis de Sales. His letters of guidance and direction reflect the various situations of the persons, like the faithful and to those who find life difficult in families. His advices are very progressive to those who wish to make a difference in their lives.⁹

Spiritual Conference

His Spiritual Conferences proves the ideal of the Salesian spirit, the highest peak of Salesian devotion and the secret of a very special way of loving God and human. It speaks about the hidden devotion, humble and ordinary lives that are consecrated in love and service of God and human, that radiates the face of the earth.¹⁰ St Francis was media man, and his intelligent and knowledge helped him to know what is necessary for the people of his time, to live a life worthy of God. He uses the media for the good of the ordinary people. His message reaches the different people of different walks of life. He speaks on Love of God, suffering, relationship, and the need of depending on divine providence.

Pamphlets

The situation among the Chablais was very critical with regard to the religious belief of the people. This forced Francis to be inventive. Slowly, Francis became the inventor of the Pamphlets with the intention to write about the Catholic faith. He made a work schedule out of his written works and made his first page. His friends helped him to make copies which he then affixed on the public places and slipped under the doors of those who had shown interest. Thus St Francis de Sales brought back the 60,000 Calvinists to Catholicism.¹¹

Books

The first book by St Francis de Sales was in 1597, entitled ‘*a short meditation on the Apostle’s Creed*’, which was meant to counteract the nonsense being proclaimed about Catholic teaching by the Calvinist ministers.¹² The book ‘*defence of the standard of the Holy Cross*’ was published in reply to La Faye, the minister who spoke, ‘cult of Crosses as being idolatrous in 1600. The book ‘*introduction to the devout life*’ appeared in February, 1609.

⁸ E. L. Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales: the Man the Thinker, His Influence*, vol.1, p. 199.

⁹ A. Feranades, *Youth and Media Culture: A Study on Church’s Response From a Salesian Perspective*, Master’s Dissertation, Faculty of Theology, IIS, SFS, 2011, p. 98.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² A. Mookenthottam, ed., *St Francis de Sales: Treatise on the love of God*, vol. 1, Bangalore, SFS, 2009, p. 26.

And the book called *'Treatise on the Love of God'* was addressed to Theophilous. He speaks through this book, about the sovereign hierarchies of Love and advice for the soul's progress in God. These are the authoritative work of St Francis de Sales which reflects perfectly, the mind and heart of him as a great and genius saint. It contains twelve books, among which, the first four gives us a history or explain the theory of divine love; it's birth in a soul, it's growth and perfection. The fifth book shows that this love is twofold; the love of complacency and benevolence. The sixth and seventh deal with the theme of affective love. The eighth and ninth deal about the conformity to do the will of God. And the other book teaches about how to apply them practically in our lives.¹³

Communication though Dialectical Preaching

From the nominal rapport which he received from his personal contact with the people, followed his further communication action which began in the pulpit. Out of the handful of Catholics in Chablais, though only a few came to listen to him, were elite group who could influence others. Francis preached to that little congregation as though he would address a great assembly. Here he adopted a dialectic character. He explained to the people, the truth of Christ's presence in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, which is both 'spiritual' and 'real.'¹⁴

St Francis de Sales a Person for all times and for all seasons

As a Bishop, he endured himself to be available to one and all, through his various roles as: preacher, confessor, mediator, spiritual director and particularly as a friend. His contribution to the socio-cultural and religio-political fabric of his time has been appreciated over the years, not only by the Church but also by scholars of literature of humanities and theology.¹⁵ Thus, Francis de Sales has become the patron of writers and journalists. St Francis de Sales died at the age of 55, in the year 1622.¹⁶

Christian Mission Today

Christian mission, on the one hand, can no longer be exclusivist in its approach, as during the period of mission during the colonial period. It can no longer be ecclesiocentric in its approach so as to deny or underestimate the presence of the logos and the spirit in the world, continuing their mysterious work of bringing salvation to all believers. On the other hand, it cannot be reduced to the promotion of the values of the kingdom of God, with the emphasis on the proclamation of Jesus Christ and the call to enter the community of the church. The Christian mission cannot be presented as purely as soteriocentric in a horizontal sense of the world, namely human promotion, thereby reducing Christian mission to a secular project.¹⁷

¹³ A. Feranades, *Youth and Media Culture: A Study on Church's Response From a Salesian Perspective*, Master's Dissertation, Faculty of Theology, IIS, SFS, 2011, p. 100.

¹⁴ M. Midathada, *Spirit of Francis de Sales: Apostle of the Chablais*, Book.II, p.36.

¹⁵ A. Mookenthottam, *Saint Francis de Sales: A Formative Biography*, 2nd ed, Bangalore, SFS,2003, p.38.

¹⁶ L. S. Fiorelli,ed., *The Sermons of St Francis de Sales on Prayer*, Rockford, 2004, p.10.

¹⁷ P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity*, New York, Oxford University press, 2002, pp.183-184.

Mission is to the people of God, who by intentionally crossing the barriers from the Church to the non-Church, faith to non-faith, and to proclaim by word and deed, the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. This task is achieved by means of the Church's participation in God's mission of reconciling people to God, to themselves, to each other, and to the world, and gathering them into the Church through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit, with a view to the transformation of the world, as a sign of the coming of the kingdom in Jesus Christ.¹⁸

Mission in the Modern World

The model of mission that we believe is emerging in our own way, is the result of a theological reflection on missionary practice in today's multicultural, multireligious, globalized and religiously polarised world, a world in which the centre of gravity of Christianity has at least in terms of population, shifted to the south, and a world in which Christianity may well be becoming more and more Pentecostal, more supernaturalist, more theologically conservative and more religiously assertive.¹⁹ No longer can we conceive of a mission in terms of the Church's expression or the salvation of souls; no longer can we conceive of mission as supporting the outreach of colonial power; no longer can we understand missionary activity as providing the blessings of western civilization to underdeveloped or developing peoples and culture; no longer can we conceive of mission as originating from a Christianized north and moving toward non-Christian areas. Mission today, is rather something much more modest and at the same time more exciting and indeed more urgent. It is not ours but God's.²⁰

The Content of Christian Mission

Christian mission discovers its foundation, goals and the content of its proclamation, solely in the commission of the resurrected Lord Jesus and his saving acts as they are reported by the witness of the Apostles and early Christians in the New Testament. Francis de Sales says, that we must respond to God's revelation by the witness of our lives, He also says that Christians are the living plants of the Church; they must bear fruit in the field which is the world. It is possible through devotion. Devotion only does not harm our vocation but on the contrary actually adorns and embellishes it. Each calling becomes even more agreeable with devotion, for example, the family becomes better, spousal love becomes more sincere, service of the prince more faithful and the work of every kind more pleasant and agreeable.²¹

¹⁸ M. Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984, p.183.

¹⁹ R.W. J. Soctt., *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, London, Falcon, 1975, p.255.

²⁰ R. J. Schreiter., *Epilogue: Mission of the Twenty First Century: A Catholic Perspective*, Stephen and Roger, ed al., Mission for the Twenty First Century, Chicago, CCGM, 2001, p.34.

²¹ A. Mookenthottam , *Francis de Sales Introduction to Devoted Life*, SFS, Bangalore, 2012, p.15.

The Supreme Goal of Christian Community

The first and supreme goal of our mission is the glorification of the kingdom of God throughout the entire world and the proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our Saviour, true God and true man, and as the Bible proclaims him in the personal mystery and his saving work, forms the basis of content, and authority of our mission. It is the goal of a mission to make known to all people the proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

This paper dealt about the relevance of communication in the view of St Francis de Sales, and the obligation of making known God's Love to every human. This chapter also dealt with regard to this responsibility and made us aware of the fact that, the prime duty of spreading Good news to the entire human race with the help of new technology, is ours.

If St Francis who lived in the sixteenth century, can do the marvelous work of God, in changing and transforming the society then we should ask ourselves as to why we cannot after having all the ways and means of communication, still not yet achieved the mission of making Christ known to the entire world?. Being the faithful and holding the responsibility of proclamation by Baptism, why still, the percentage of Christians, remains as a minority in our nation? For St Francis, venturing and making people to venture in devotion, is very practical. His writing and methods are still relevant because he touches us with his very way of living, his faithfulness to God, his simplicity in approaching others, and his enthusiasm and zeal in making God known to the people, with whom he was entrusted. So this thesis invites the pastors and readers to learn from St Francis de Sales, especially from his example and his writings which are up to date. A Church or a Christian who does not give witness is sterile like a dead person who thinks they are alive; like a dried up tree that produces no fruit; an empty well that offers no water. The Church wants men and women of prayer, masters of prayer that we may teach the same to the people entrusted to our care. For centuries after his death, even today, St Francis de Sales stands as a shining example for the effective communication of God's message to the world, that God still loves the world. For Francis communication was much more than the method, for him it was the mission and above all life itself.

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