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## **Contemplation and action in Francis de Sales: hints for a journey of Christian and religious formation.**

### 1. Action and Contemplation: difficult companions

H.U. von Balthasar argues that the history of the pair of the two concepts in question (Action and Contemplation) is one of the most intricate in existence, because of the different layers of the Greek philosophical tradition and the biblical tradition that intersect with it. In fact, the antinomy in question is not rooted in the deep layers of philosophical and theological reflection but in the superficiality of everyday life stretched between external activity and the spiritual attitude to be held in it. In ancient times, the over-eminence of contemplation over action emerged with an emphasis on mental activities over those of vital necessity. Along the same ambiguous line is the Greek finalism of the superiority of the intimate and personal over the external and social. This way of seeing things had a decisive influence on the Fathers and on St. Thomas, whereby the leading formula remains that contemplation is ultimately above action, to the point of identifying the active life with the secular life and the contemplative life with the religious life of counsels. The mendicants will try to unseat this common way of thinking, promoting the ideal of action that emanates from contemplation (*contemplata aliis tradere*), as the fulfilment of contemplation. von Balthasar himself again asks whether there is a beyond of contemplation and action fused both in a mysterious unity and answers in the affirmative if we leave room for God's action in us. This action of God is nothing other than his eternal love. A love that, when it is loved back, invites us to give ourselves to our neighbour. Thus in Jesus. He only works what he sees the Father accomplishing. What the Father does, the Son who contemplates the Father's action also does. They are not two acts but one: the Father acts in the Son and reveals his love through action. What the Son sees is the Father's permanent invitation to engage with Him for the salvation of the world. For us, as a consequence, this will be the invitation to look in faith at God's saving work in Christ and to participate in that work by encountering God's love in His commitment to the world. This is the vocation to contemplation as total availability to God, in which one can recognise the true and proper principle of Christian fruitfulness, that is, an ardent readiness to be employed and used for the salvation and redemption of the world, as the saints testify. The Christian life is thus always already beyond the two moments that complement each other from within and not outwardly. This is a wonderful theoretical framework, but is it practically possible to implement it? Is there anyone who has particularly succeeded? Absolutely. Francis de Sales is one of them, perhaps the best.

### 2. Contemplation and action in Francis de Sales

Like all transitional epochs, the early years of the 17th century present a curious mixture of contradictory aspirations that are difficult to interpret. Indeed, one could call the period between the 16th and 17th centuries the era of broken hearts, due to the disorientation caused by the religious wars, the disenchantment caused by the relaxation and corruption in the church on both sides of the Alps, and at the same time due to the presence of so many strands of mysticism that appeared in Europe: Spanish, Italian, French and Flemish spirituality. A time that in people's general feeling resulted in an urgent need for social armistice and purification, but above all for balance, peace and harmony in hearts that were too torn apart in the inner dynamism of opposing forces between the drive towards proud and sensual ecstasy and the attraction of grace towards the ecstasy of the spirit. The human drama then, as always, is played out in the inner dynamism of these opposing forces, which then radiate into every expression of the person, whether when he gathers in prayer or when he engages in any kind of activity. A time that therefore needs magnetising points for an encounter, an agreement, a synthesis of profound pacification. Francis de Sales is one of these powerful magnets, who lives through the years of the very harsh and violent crisis of the second half of the 16th century and the first years of the 17th century, first of all nurturing and forming in his own person this great tension and desire for synthesis and then spreading it, as the ripe fruit, emanating from his rich personality, in the pastoral commitment of his diocese; finally multiplying it beyond space and time, in the peaks of his reflection and doctrine. We admire the prodigious activity of this bishop on horseback, his living out the heroism of Christ for his unbelieving or heretical brethren, without neglecting the path of Christian maturity towards holiness of those in the Lord's fold, but the Saint at the same time leads us deeper to turn our attention to the initiation of the inner life through the constant and patient exercise of love, through the worship of God's presence, through profound prayer in action, because his fundamental principle is everything by love and nothing by force.

For it is love that gathers and unites all aspects of action into a contemplative solution. It must be said that rarely, not only in his time, has the problem of apostolic and spiritual action been resolved correctly as we have seen above; and the reason is always because love does not sufficiently move the spirits and the heart. The Bishop of Geneva becomes the master and fruitful inspirer of this synthesis of action and contemplation. How? According to his teaching, it is necessary to start from the realism of life, not from the theories and cultural assumptions, indebted to the different trends of thought, and the shattering of experience, which mostly lead to the absolutization of the parts over the whole. There is a need for the harmonious reconstitution of unity itself because behind it all there is not chaos but a project. It is the vital reality that holds the parts together in the whole. It is the existence of each person in his or her concrete context that forms the backdrop and the basis on which to set reflection and work on the synthesis with the reality of life that holds the parts together in the whole. To start, therefore, from the vital reality of concrete existence and, consequently, to

take note, through experience, that all human living is structured as a vast field of mostly opposing polarities; from one pole to the other life transits with a continuous oscillation between many bivalent, evolutionary, involutive possibilities. That is why we need a driving centre, one that is a different resolving centre and that allows harmony and balance of opposites. And indeed we have a point, a vital centre, as the heart of life, which is deputed to bring order and harmony as an inner balancing centre of gravity. This vital centre is traversed by the path of love that can be approached and found through the mediation and contribution of beauty, as a formation of the senses, both natural and spiritual. All this process is possible because it is guaranteed, attracted and absorbed in Christ; in Him we have the overcoming of all polarities as the end and harmony of everything. This path, which Francis envisages in his concrete accompaniment of people, the many Philotheas and Theotimas, is collected as the maturation of his thought in the three fundamental works: Introduction to the Devout Life, Treatises and Treatise on the Love of God and, crumbled into the thousands of letters of spiritual direction; summed up finally in the term *dévotion*, the most mysterious but also the most present character among Francis' many friends, Philotheas and Theotimas. In the context of modern devotion, he has the ability to bring the concept of devotion back to its original spirit, i.e. to the theological container offered by St. Thomas but reinterpreted with the mystical passion of St. Bernard. Hence *dévotion* represents for him that magnetic point that brings about harmony between action and contemplation, i.e. an impulse of charity, a response of the heart to God beyond the polar circumstances of the present, beyond and beyond action and contemplation. An inner impulse under the influence of a permanent attraction from God. It is a call to the perfecting of love with the capacity to absorb the person's traits and behaviour in order to launch them into God and his will; which, as a consequence, is transformed into an ecstasy of action and life, i.e. into a more of love, faith and hope. Ecstasy of action and life in which everything is attracted and absorbed in God and at the same time everything is given in the concrete everydayness of adherence to God's will and in the relationship of charity towards one's neighbour.

### 3. Contemplative in action - active in contemplation

The fascination of the proposal Francis de Sales offers us to live contemplation and action conveniently intersects with the contemporary situation in many ways similar to the time of the Doctor of Love. Undoubtedly there is a perennial challenge on how to keep action and contemplation together, particularly in our time. We have so many mechanisms today that play into making this particularly difficult, because there are many factors that take away spiritual depth and interiority, and we are and remain wounded children of this age. We have greater challenges to face today than in the past, and moreover in a culture of mistrust that causes a significant divide between the sacred and the profane with regard to the religious fact. Today's economic potentates and marketing need individualistic and dissatisfied

individuals with a false idea of freedom. It is therefore typical of today to develop a narcissistic style, whereby it is the individual who determines what is good and what is bad based on personal success and satisfaction with a cultural immediatism that demands quick and easy results in everything. An individualism that seems to immediately ensure and empower being oneself as the sole force, entrusted mostly to a series of algorithms, but which in reality weakens the person and fills them with fears that isolate them from others. It is really not yet clear who and what the digital man is. Hence also the silent schism of taking from what the Church proposes and teaches what fits one's own ideology of life. Hence fatigue, failure, habit, weariness, concern for one's privacy, with an excessive need for personal space and personal autonomy. Hence with pastoral workers in all states of life with an inferiority complex, which leads one to relativise and conceal in some way one's Christian and vocational identity in order to be accepted by society, and consequently with a notable lack of happiness for what one is and what one does with a real schizophrenia between the prevailing secularisation that has invaded even the Church and the lofty demands of vocation and mission. Hence there is the constant urge to adapt to the current mentality, to wanting to be like others, and consequently even going so far as to conceal one's own life choices with a considerable gap with respect to one's identity and mission. There is no desire to share existence and one's projects with others. And even celibacy can be experienced as isolation. We therefore have the fatigue of constant commitment. With the more than probable risk that all this prevails in fact over life commitments that often become only an appendix to one's profound life: incarnating spirituality in daily life, meeting with others, commitment in the world, evangelising passion... In short, there is a lack of spirit in activities and flesh in spirituality. The mission itself no longer manages to fully mark personal identity, so that one feels more valued in other spheres than those that strictly belong to one's vocation; with a faith that in fact does not involve everything, so that even in the face of pastoral needs one is rather on the defensive with a sort of inner refusal to get involved, except when the likelihood of financial gain and prestige arises. In many cases, we have a kind of commuting between hyperactivity and a stage of disillusionment and abulic 'fiacre', needing constant gratification with much personal satisfaction. Summing up, we have a lot of misguided activities without valid motivations and without a spirituality that truly impregnates the action resulting in dissatisfaction of life. In short, we need to rediscover fervour and apostolic courage, permanent familiarity with God and joy in one's vocation and mission, prayer at the heart of one's occupations in order to achieve a clear unity between personal spiritual intimacy and action, mission. It is this that produces a life with deep meaning and satisfaction, when the spiritual and pastoral dimensions interpenetrate intimately, so that the joy of following the Lord emerges at all times, coming to experience the encounter with Christ at all times (experiencing that He walks with me, breathes with me, lives with me, works with me,...). With the intimate certainty that the Father loves me, whatever happens, letting myself be loved by Him, relativising everything else. All this should

become a precious instrument of God's presence and gifts, discovering seeds of life present everywhere. How can all this be translated into practice?

Some useful pointers to the school of Francis de Sales:

a. Restore value to our daily dedication, rediscovering the sense and taste of our work and activity. We do not have to solve all the world's problems: this is an entrepreneurial mentality but not very evangelical. Instead, we must ask ourselves what part the various commitments occupy in our hearts. It is therefore necessary to immerse ourselves in the present, concentrating on one thing at a time, because anxiety over a thousand commitments makes us superficial and meeting people becomes trivial.

b. Through prayer, develop a sense of the mystery of our actions. Only God knows the effects of our activity in the heart of the world. So no action done for God is lost despite failures and anxieties. Then it is worthwhile to sacrifice oneself, to dedicate oneself with love even in the small things, knowing that in each case my action is a treasure that affects reality and gives meaning and life. In this way one also learns to trust others so that all assume their responsibilities. Where there is no competence, there is insecurity and we cannot even improve the service we provide.

c. Knowing how to carefully discern the necessary activities so as not to overburden oneself beyond measure, otherwise it becomes difficult to tackle them with spiritual intensity. It is merely activism. It requires realistic and well-defined goals and objectives based on strengths and possibilities. This requires discerning what is to be done and preparing the work in order to then face the various commitments serenely, looking for the motivations that give meaning and tend to a true disinterested love for God and others, and then devoting the necessary time and attention to them. To this end, it is always important to consider the possible inner blocks that are played out between attractions, rejections, resistances both with regard to the various activities and the relationships with the people involved.

All this leads us to experience action and contemplation as entering into God's rest. In God creating and resting contemplating are two sides of the same action. If we do nothing we fall into depressive non-sense; if we only work we end up in performance exhaustion. Only when we too are enabled to create/act and contemplate/rest will we live in fullness. But creating and resting are relationship-oriented out of love for what we do and to love the people with whom and for whom we act. Then it is a divine energy in us that does not dissipate but continuously regenerates. And once again it is contemplative and active love that unifies and gives life. True ecstasy of action and life.