

The Salesian Approach to Why I Remain a Catholic

Alexander T. Pocetto, OSFS

Senior Salesian Scholar

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Introduction

Two pundits in the *Federalist* have expressed their views of the clerical sexual abuse moral morass – one a Protestant, the other a Catholic. The Protestant, Korey Maas, in his post entitled, “Protestant Questions for Scandalized Catholics Who Still Remain Catholic,” asks: “If Catholic leaders like George Weigel and Robert George believe that their Catholic faith, which is ‘trust in Jesus,’ is the basis for remaining in the Catholic Church why can’t they find that in other Protestant communions?”¹ Matthew Petrussek, his Catholic colleague, responds by arguing that the grave abuse is not a crisis of faith, echoing George Weigel, but one of hypocrisy: “It is a crisis precisely because it violates these teachings so gravely and brazenly.”² Weigel, I believe, goes to the nub of the problem: “I’d suggest to those imagining themselves in a crisis of faith that they’re experiencing something different: a challenge to understanding what the Church really is.”

As you all know, the theme for this Live Jesus Conference is “Jesus, the Church and Me.” I would change it slightly by saying: “Jesus, the Church and We.” It is the “WE” aspect that I would like to stress in my talk.

The Impact on Catholics in General

Many practicing and non-practicing Catholics are rightly angered, deceived, and disgusted, especially by the egregious actions or inactions of some bishops and what is perceived by a lack of concern of the Vatican itself. Along with these disheartening and dispiriting sentiments, I note from personal, limited experience that many of these Catholics are reflecting on how they live their Catholic faith in the light of all the horrific actions of some priests and other ecclesiastics. In the wake of the revelations of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report, there seems to be a desire to face this lack of trust in the leadership of the

¹ <https://thefederalist.com/2018/11/19/church-abuse-far-catholic-faithful/>.

² <http://thefederalist.com/2018/11/27/stop-weaponizing-priest-abuse-crisis-catholic-theology/>.

Catholic Church by being more committed to their beliefs. Let me cite two examples. For the past 5 or 6 years, the Allentown diocese has held ‘A Day of Spirit’ for men on the first Saturday of November at De Sales University. In 2017 around 500 men participated; last November, there were 100 more, even though the local paper for weeks ran daily articles on the priest sexual abuse scandal! Another obvious example is the encouraging and edifying turnout today of this Live Jesus group. The Allentown diocese as well as a number of other dioceses are making available for Lent a Healing Our Church program developed by RENEW which will give the laity an opportune to express in small groups their thoughts, feelings and concerns about the priest sexual abuse scandal.

Now if I may be presumptuous, it appears that at heart you and the men of the Spirit group and many other Catholics are implicitly embracing Erasmus’s reason for remaining in the Catholic Church in spite of its corruption. After being rebuked by Luther, for not leaving the Catholic Church, Erasmus responded: “I support this Church in the hope that she will become better, because she is also constrained to bear with me in the hope that I will become better.”³

Erasmus and His Criticisms of Church Corruption

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) had a significant influence on Francis de Sales in the approach and the spirit he took to reform his diocese and more importantly on how individual Christians could become better together. Erasmus is known as the Prince of Christian Humanist. As such, he, among many others, helped shape De Sales’s views on the laity and holiness, the view of the Church, the importance of going back to Christian sources, viz., Sacred Scripture, the Fathers, and the positive contributions of the writers of ancient Greece and Rome. De Sales became acquainted with the writings of Erasmus while studying at the Jesuit college of Clérmont in Paris where the students honed their Latin skills by reading the *Adages* (a collection of Latin proverbs) of Erasmus. One of his better known and more popular writings was his *Enchiridion* (or *Manual of the Christian Soldier*). Concerning this work, one commentator notes: “Erasmus’s contemporaries found it astonishing and challenging: a new vision of Christianity, which insisted that pious laymen and laywomen were the spiritual equals of those traditionally called ‘religious,’ the members of orders.”⁴ So this work seems to have had a similar impact on the Church as the *Introduction to a Devout Life* regarding the universal call to holiness.

During his lifetime, Erasmus was a very controversial figure, primarily because of his attempts to help reform the Church, viz., the hierarchy, priests and religious. His writings were later placed on the Index of Prohibited Books, because he was considered to be a Protestant sympathizer. Interestingly, we find in the appendix of vol. 2 of the 27 volumes of the Anney edition of De Sales’s *oeuvres complètes*, a list of books on the Index of the

³ <https://zenit.org/articles/of-weeds-and-seeds/>.

⁴ *The Praise of Folly* by Desiderius Erasmus, and Anthony Grafton (Princeton University Press, 2015-06-09 ebook, p. xv. Hereafter *Folly*).

era which he had permission to read.⁵ Among them, we find two of Erasmus's writings, a translation of the New Testament and another Latin work.

In his many writings, but particularly in his work *The Praise of Folly*, dedicated to Sir Thomas More, his close friend and admirer, Erasmus penned some devastating, sarcastic criticisms of the Church and her leaders. He viciously attacked the subtleties of scholasticism. “[The men of the school] draw,” he says, “an exact picture of every part of hell as if they had spent many years in that commonwealth.”⁶ With regard to the character of monks, he observes: “The men who generally call themselves ‘religious’ [and] ‘monks’ – utterly false names both, since most of them keep as far away as they can from religion.” Furthermore, “all orders take remarkable care that nothing in their way of life shall be consistent; nor is it so much their concern to be like Christ as to be unlike each other”⁷. Erasmus did not spare the clergy and those in high places. He could not abide the abysmal ignorance of too many priests, whose “shaven crown,” he says, “[does not] in the least remind them that a priest ought to be free from all worldly desire and ought to set his mind upon nothing than heavenly things.”⁸

Erasmus was emboldened to take higher aim. “Our popes, cardinals, and bishops for sometime now have earnestly copied the state and practice of princes, and come near to beating them at their own game”⁹ In his view, ‘the church [had no] enemies more pestilential than impious pontiffs who by their silence allow Christ to be forgotten, who enchain Him by mercenary rules, adulterate His teaching by forced interpretation, and crucify him afresh by their scandalous life’¹⁰ Those words are a stinging indictment of the highest ranking prelates. And Martin Luther wrote mockingly that the pope had as much command over celibacy as “the natural movement of the bowels.”¹¹

This gives you some flavor of Erasmus' caustic attacks and of the extent of the corruption of the Church in his day. Although Luther excoriated Erasmus for not leaving the Church, Erasmus was greatly admired by others for trying to reform the Church from within and in our day became recognized as one of the forerunners of Vatican II. The union or communion among men that the Church is called to realize was a value highly esteemed by a group of 17th century French independent thinkers (*La Tetrade*). One of them, the Dean of the Medical School of the University of Paris (Guy Patin) and a great admirer of St. Francis de Sales, seems to express the sentiment of the group when he praises Erasmus because, in spite of all the corruption and abuses in the Church, he never broke away from her and never broke the ecclesial bonds. “I love Erasmus,” Patin admits, “for many reasons

⁵ *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales, édition complète, 27 vols.* (Annecy: J. Niérat et al., 1892-1964), 2:425-27 Hereafter OEA.

⁶ *Folly*, 84

⁷ *Folly*, 86-87.

⁸ *Folly*, 101.

⁹ *Folly*, 97.

¹⁰ *Folly*, 100.

¹¹ <https://toritto.wordpress.com/2019/02/23/sex-celibacy-and-the-catholic-church/>

[one] of which... is that he cried out against the abuses he saw in ecclesiastics without causing a schism and without separating himself from the Church.”¹²

When criticized by his fellow monks of “laying the egg that Luther hatched,” Erasmus responded by saying he expected “quite another kind of bird.” He did not look to break away from the Church and expressed his fidelity to her in this fashion: “Death will not part me from it,” he vowed, “unless the Church openly departs from Christ.”¹³ Henri Bremond points to the relationship of Erasmus and De Sales when he remarks: “‘I laid an egg of a dove,’ Erasmus used to say, ‘Luther made a serpent come out of it.’ Let him be assured, his dove was born and was called St. Francis de Sales.”¹⁴

St. Francis de Sales and Church Reform

Reforming the Church in De Sales’ day was an enormous undertaking because it was tied to long-held institutional practices and closely allied with secular powers. One of the most notable and very resistant to change was granting benefices *in commendam* which permitted a person holding the title, for example, of abbot to receive some of its revenue without fulfilling any of the duties of an abbot or even residing at the monastery. Many benefices of monasteries, bishoprics and pastorates were awarded and sought after merely or primarily for the income and were handed down to family members as if they were personal patrimony. De Sales did not hesitate to write very frankly to Pope Clement VIII in 1604: “Certainly, it is very distressing that among several monasteries of different orders in this diocese, you can scarcely find a single one of them where religious discipline is not shaken and even completely ignored.”¹⁵ Two years later, he informed Pope Paul V of the same distressing situation.

De Sales’s Concept of the Church

To understand how the saint approached and undertook many reforms in his diocese, we need to appreciate the concept that he had of the Church and its relationship to the Lord Jesus as opposed to the reformers. He described his diocese as “exposed to the plague” of Calvinism. I am borrowing here what I wrote years ago on “The Ecclesial Dimensions of Salesian Thought.”¹⁶

The question of the visible Church was hotly debated in the sixteenth century by both Protestant and Catholic apologists. Luther and the other reformers contrasted ‘spiritual’ with ‘visible’ in speaking about the nature of the Church. They maintained that the true Church is spiritual and hence invisible. But the saint, as a

¹² As cited by René Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle*, Paris, Boivin, 1943), 324. My translation,

¹³ <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1201-1500/erasmus-11629886.html>.

¹⁴ Henri Bremond, *Autour de l’humanisme*, (Paris: Grasset, 1936), 138.

¹⁵ OEA, 7:371-73.

¹⁶ <http://hosted.desales.edu/files/salesian/PDF/Pocettoecclesial.pdf>.

young missionary in a magnificent paraphrase of the apparition of the resurrected Christ to the apostles, asserts that there is no inherent opposition between the two ideas. For him the Church is all spiritual and visible because it is the resurrected body of Christ:

But what is the Church? An assembly of human beings who have flesh and bones. And will we still say that it is only a spirit or phantom which appears to be visible and is only so by illusion?... See her hands, look at her ministers, officers and administrators, see her feet, look at her preachers how they carry it when getting up and when going to bed. All are flesh and blood. Touch her, like humble children throw yourselves on the lap of this gentle mother, see her, consider her well in all her body how she is all beautiful, and you will see that she is visible, “for a spiritual” and invisible thing “has neither flesh nor bones as you see she has”[Lk 24:39].(OEA, 1:47; eccl.dimen.,p. 8).

The Church as the Resurrected body of Christ is marked by the blows and wounds of his passion. When Erasmus says that “impious pontiffs....crucify him anew by their scandalous life,” and later, Pascal echoing the same idea when he says that the agony of Christ still continues in suffering humanity, they are both saying that Jesus’s wounds now are self-inflicted by the members of his own body so that the Church is always in need of being reformed (*Ecclesia semper reformanda est*) and of healing. And the Church, today and throughout its entire history, because it is made of “flesh and bones,” was and is being badly battered and profusely bleeding. But it is this very blood that can reform and heal. Dorothy Day expresses this truth in this fashion: “No matter how corrupt the Church is, it always carries within it the seeds of its own regeneration.”¹⁷ Ross Douthat, the *New York Times* Catholic columnist, commenting on the genealogy of the opening pages of Matthew’s gospel, remarks: “The idea that biblical religion has always proposed is emphatically *not* that you can tell whether a people is chosen by the virtue of their leaders. It’s that the divine chooses to act constantly amid not just ordinary fallibility but real depravity — that strong temptations as well as great sanctity are concentrated where God wants to work.”¹⁸ This truth is very unsettling not only to Catholics but non-Catholics as well. The Protestant writer noted above implicitly espouses a spiritual and invisible church by asserting that other Christian churches are good options for such scandalized Catholics as George Weigel and Robert George since they are what he calls a “less compromised environment.”

The Catholic’s relationship to the Church is an ongoing love affair as embodied by the resurrected body of Christ, the head of the Church. It is a specific recognizable body as established by Jesus himself. This is beautifully and strikingly noted in the very two first paragraphs of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. In the “Preface,” De Sales gives a very intriguing, positive and optimistic image of the Church. If we break it down in the following way, we may can get a better grasp of its inherent beauty and goodness

¹⁷ <http://jimandnancyforest.com/2011/10/writings-of-dorothy-day/>

¹⁸ “Staying Catholic at Christmas,” *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 2018.

1. In the very first paragraph of the “Preface” of this great spiritual classic, the Church is compared to the Beloved in the *Canticle of Canticles*. It is described as having scarlet lips that are sweet and mellifluous to indicate that the teaching which comes from her mouth consists of sacred love. (Cant.4:3,11) The color red is woven throughout the paragraph to tie together the various aspects of this image of the Church. The red blood that runs through the scarlet lips of the Beloved, the Church, has its source or its redness from the scarlet blood of the Beloved who poured out his blood out of love for us, his Church.

The color red is tied also to the tongues of fire that descended on the Church at Pentecost. This signifies for our saint that the purpose of evangelical preaching was "to set men's hearts on fire." Considering, the pitiful state of preaching in the Catholic Church of that era and how the reformers railed against it and made it the cornerstone of the Reformation, this statement must have warmed the hearts of even the most adamant anti-Catholic Reformer. We see here that De Sales fully agrees with Erasmus and the Reformers on the importance and absolute necessity of evangelical preaching, viz., of preaching the word of God, Sacred Scriptures. He incorporates this idea of the goal of evangelical preaching in a little treatise sent by way of a letter to the Archbishop of Bourges, the brother of St. Jane de Chantal. In the *Treatise* itself, he makes the remarkable statement that most of the inspirations that come from God come to us through preachers. When we consider the importance that he gives to inspirations in this work as well as in the *Devout Life*, we can better understand the great value he placed on preaching and the great responsibility that the preacher has "to set hearts on fire." [It is said that he preached over 350 sermons the year (1619) he was in Paris]

2. In the second paragraph, the Church, as a multicolored dove, is adorned by the many writers adding their luster to the beauty of the Church. What gives these writings the golden luster is the "fine goal of holy charity." He references a verse from Ps. 68:14: “Though you rested among the sheepfolds, the wings of the dove shone with silver, and her pinions with a golden hue.”
3. These striking and multi-layered images are intended to move us to see and appreciate that "In holy Church all is by love, in love, for love, and of love." It calls for spousal fidelity, commitment and lasting attachment not so much to an institution but to the person of the resurrected and still suffering person of Jesus. Of course, this loving embrace of the Lord Jesus is also, at the same time, an embracing of the Church, of Jesus living and alive because we cannot separate the head from the body; otherwise it will result willy-nilly in a devastating mutilation. His optimistic view of the Church is all the more remarkable in the midst of such widespread institutional and personal corruption and how the Church was generally looked upon by the Reformers, some of whom referred to it as the "Whore of Babylon," (Rev: 17, 18).

De Sales’ Episcopal Leadership and Pastoral Approach

In his article "Leadership in the Salesian Tradition," Fr. Lewis Fiorelli, OSFS, points out a special revelation that St. Francis de Sales experienced during his episcopal consecration. The saint described it in the following manner: "God had turned me out of myself in order to take me to Himself, and then he gave me back to the people, i.e., He converted me for what I was for myself into what I was to be for them." This conversion experience made him like Jesus, "A Man for others," to borrow Dietrich Bonhoeffer's expression.

One incident recorded by his very close friend, Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus, captures the essence of his pastoral concern of how God "converted [him] from what [he] was for [himself] into what [he] was to be for [the people]" On hearing how a poor shepherd in one of the mountainous villages of his diocese that he was visiting lost his life in trying to save one of his cows, our saint reflected: "I said to myself, 'poor widows and village folk are full of goodness and piety, while we Bishops, who are placed upon the Church's heights, are cold and hard. Is there no sunshine to melt the chilliness of my heart?'" Well, we know that he basked in the warming and enlightening sunshine of God's love and reflected this warmth and light in all of his personal and pastoral relations and in his writings.

As recounted in my article on the "The Sternness of the Gentle Francis de Sales,"¹⁹ Bishop Camus, his very dear friend, complained to the saint about someone who greatly wronged him. The saint criticized him for feeling sorry for himself: "Anyone but you," he said, "I should try to comfort you. But your position and the pure love which I hold for you, dispense me from this act of courtesy. I have no oil to pour into your wound, and perhaps, were I to sympathize with you, it might only add to the inflammation. I have nothing but vinegar and salt to pour in, and I must simply put into practice the advice of the Apostle: 'Reprove, entreat.'"

Camus, stung by this response, says that he had recourse to the saint as a child goes to a loving father. The saint, however, continues his stern correction:

"You indeed are a child!" he answered. "How long do you expect to go on clinging to your childhood? Is it right that one who is the father of others, one who is a Bishop in God's Church should be so childish? Does not St. Paul tell us that when we are children we may speak as children, but not when we are become men?"²⁰

In other words, the saint tells Camus without mincing his words: "Grow up!"

When Camus objects that it was evil men and not God that caused him this wrong, the saint reminds him of God's permissive will and what happened to Job. He anticipates Camus' response: "But Father, how is it that you have become so harsh, and have changed your gentleness into cruelty, as Job says to almighty God – Where is your unfailing kindness?" The saint responds to his own rhetorical question that what moved him to give this stern

¹⁹ <http://hosted.desales.edu/files/salesian/PDF/ATP-Sternness.pdf>

²⁰ Jean-Pierre Camus, *The Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*, ed. and trans. C.F. Kelley (New York: Harper Brothers, 1952), 147-48. See also, *L'Esprit*, M.C.P., pp. 327-28.

and harsh correction was the great love that he has for him. In today's terms, we would call this 'tough love,' one that motivates us to speak the unvarnished truth to others for whom we have a great affection and who matter a great deal to us.

This incident reminds us that a bishop, when the occasion has serious consequences for the Church such as not properly disciplining either himself or errant priests, needs to have the courage and the prudence of speaking up. Of course, the most effective way of doing this is the way a bishop leads his own life and his own diocese. This St. Francis de Sales did admirably and has inspired numerous bishops over the centuries to follow his example.

De Sales's Reforms

In his biography of the saint, Fr. Lajeunie notes the spirit with which De Sales undertook the reform of his diocese: The saint writes to one of his directees, a nun: "I have always maintained that such important features [enclosure] depended on inspiration and not on external authority; it might make enclosed women of them but not Religious."²¹ This magnificent page demonstrates the spirit in which the saint introduced reform: It should be inspired, not imposed"²². Although De Sales's predecessor (Bishop Granier) worked on reforming his clergy, the situation of priests was still in a lamentable state. Like Erasmus, he abhorred their ignorance which was not only a danger to their faith and fidelity, but also to the people. "Priests who do not study, he would say, fall by the wayside sooner or later... Ignorance is 'more dangerous than malice...[in] that it hurts not only the person, but supposes contempt for the ecclesiastical state.'" This is why he insisted that knowledge for a priest is "the eighth sacrament."²³ In his day, the word "priest" (*prêtre*) became "synonymous with shameful and dishonorable and was hardly used in society save for an ignoramus or lecher"²⁴ So in reforming his priests, he first strengthened his authority of bishop, insisted on the dignity of a bishop and thereby strongly associated his dignity as bishop with the dignity of his priest's by his many priestly spiritual conferences, ready accessibility and in the high esteem and expectations he had for them.

In order to prevent unqualified priests to hold benefices, he instituted examinations for these offices. Lajeunie stresses the importance of these priestly examinations: "Bishops. . . abused their privilege of patronage by handing down the greater number of benefices from uncle to nephew and sometimes from father to son. Now the examination constituted a weapon which turned away the unworthy, wrested the benefices from the hands of the noblemen and gave them to commoners if merit deserved it."²⁵

Moreover, in consort with his priests, he set up synodal regulations to help them in their ministry to live chaste lives. One of these regulations states: "No women of 'doubtful reputation' [were] permitted to reside in presbyteries unless they were immediate

²¹ OEA, 19:15]

²² E.J. Lajeunie, O.P., trans. by Rory O'Sullivan, O.S.F.S., 2 vols. *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, The Thinker, His Influence* (Bangalore: S.F.S. Publications, 1986), 2:455). Hereafter Lajeunie.

²³ OEA, 23:303.

²⁴ Lajeunie, 2:36.

²⁵ Lajeunie, 2:13.

relatives.”²⁶ He excommunicated an obstinate priest. De Sales looked upon the ‘sacred canons’ as providing wise boundaries for priests and insisted, especially in the area of chastity, that they be strictly observed.

He had a firm and unbending attitude toward unworthy or scandalous priestly behavior. “If I should hide their faults,” he stated, “I would become their accomplice; they are the ones whom I will fear to render account before God. I have no torment worse than their scandal...for such criminals, I never show indulgence.” (Lajeunie, 2:44-45).

De Sales had an ecclesial view of the Church rather than an ecclesiastical one, in the sense that he underscored that the Church is much more than the members of the hierarchy. Although he strengthened his authority as Bishop and reorganized the clergy by setting up priest supervisors in various districts of his diocese who would mentor and oversee the ministry of the priests under their charge, he also profoundly understood the dignity of the laity in the body of Christ as Erasmus set forth in his *Enchiridion*, mentioned above. In renewing and stressing the universal call to holiness, especially by his great spiritual classic, the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, he thereby declared and explained how essential the laity are for the Church and its reform. He set about teaching and inspiring them on how to deepen their spiritual lives or to reform them. De Sales would certainly espouse this sentiment of George Bernanos: “The only way of reforming the vices of the Church is to lavish on her the example of one’s own most heroic virtues.”²⁷

For me, the key section of the *Devout life* is chapter 23 of Part 3, “On the Practice of Exterior Mortifications.” The whole book is intended to help people from all walks of life, especially the laity, to become better by falling in love and growing in love with the Lord Jesus. To love and embrace the Lord Jesus as he exists today is to love and embrace the Church. De Sales set great value on beginning with the heart to reform our lives or to become better. And we do this primarily by placing Jesus in the center of our hearts because whoever has Jesus in his heart, as De Sales tells us, has him in all of his actions. This is no doubt what has motivated all of you to be here today – an opportunity and the occasion to reinforce your desire and your commitment to live Jesus more ardently and more fervently so that in striving to become better, you will inevitably help the Church to become better.

Conclusion

As a final thought, I am reminded of what Peter Maurin says about so many people who desire greater material things and justify acquiring them by saying: “I just want to be better off.” Here’s what he says about being better off and just being better:

“The world would be better off
if people tried to become better
and people would become better

²⁶ See OEA, 18 :2 ; Lajeunie, 2:35.

²⁷ Cited by Archbishop Christophe Pierre’s talk, “US: Address of Apostolic Nuncio to Bishops,” 11/12/18.

if they stopped trying to become better off.
For when everyone tries to become
better off nobody is better off
But when everyone tries to become better
everyone is better off.”²⁸

²⁸ Peter Maurin, as cited in W. Wright, *Seasons of a Family Life: Cultivating the Contemplative Spirit at Home*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 99.