### Communication is a Matter of the Heart": the second article in the series "St. Francis de Sales Communicator. Inner Pilgrimage, Wisdom in the Art of Communicating"

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St Francis lived in a culture and society marked by religious tensions, especially with Calvinism and Jansenism. Jansenism maintained that the human being is born and sinner and never becomes good without divine assistance. We know how, for example, the notion of predestination led St Francis de Sales into a deep existential crisis. The problem of the relationship between grace and human freedom had bothered St Francis terribly for many years. Having survived this crisis with loving abandonment to God, a new and profoundly liberating view of his relationship with God opened up for him, placing Christian life as a gift at the centre of his reflection. The human person, in receiving this gift, responds to God out of love, not fear. Therefore, living a Christian life means setting out on a spiritual pilgrimage where the person is created, loved, chosen and cared for by a loving God. The person responds to this love and thus develops an active relationship with God. The person who believes in God responds freely to this love, is committed to living Christian life daily with joy and in the service of others. Seen this way, an individual who responds freely to this love becomes a collaborator with God in his plan for salvation

The discovery and interpretation of the Word of God from a ‘Wisdom’ perspective. Beginning with the Psalms, and especially the Song of Songs, Francis used this Wisdom literature to interpret the Word of God, and this transformed his life. Francis was a disciple of Génébrard, who had been fascinated by the biblical poetry of the Song of Songs and the Psalms. The lesson had a profound existential impact on the young Francis. The love of God manifested as spousal, mystical and wisdom-based love is a central point in Francis’ great transformation and spiritual journey.

The wisdom-based interpretation emphasises precisely that God has willed, out of love, that human beings participate in the covenant of this love. “Now God wanted the human being to share in his intimate spiritual quality (Wis 7:7; 9,1-18), the quality with which he created the world and governs it (Prov 8:22-31; Sir 24:3-22; Wis 8:1), so that, by this fundamental endowment, it is given to man to resemble the Creator and Lord. Indeed, it is precisely in the wisdom tradition, and precisely because of the gift of wisdom, that it is recalled that man was created in the image of God. (Sir 17:3; Wis 2:23), and to him is given the power to rule over the earth (Prov 8:15-16; Sir 4,15; Wis 6:20-21; 8:14). This new wisdom-based outlook is decisive in St Francis view of communication and is the root of his “theology of the heart”.

Considering the battle against the Catholic Church and its doctrine, the criticism of the Calvinists and an easy environment for heresies, Francis had a significant challenge: to communicate in a simple, informal but at the same time, safe way, faithful to the teachings of the church, and avoiding personal and ambiguous interpretations and possible heresies. Francis, therefore, is a communicator with considerable pastoral and ecclesial, theological and spiritual responsibility.

The expansion of the way we communicate and the use of new languages. St Francis was trained in the philosophical and theological thinking of his time, but he brilliantly realised that language offered an opening for communicative creativity through the richness of symbols, images, sounds, metaphors. He also chose the Gospel as the basis for his communication, knowing how to interpret and use the great imaginative variety of parables and symbols found in Jesus’ preaching. Francis, therefore, discovered the power of narrative in communication, the use of stories, an expression of great imaginative and symbolic power. His great interest in art such as music and painting reveals a communicator who knows how to integrate the Church’s teaching with the Gospel by using an accessible, artistic and emotional kind of language. This knowledge enabled him to remain faithful to the epistemology and hermeneutics of the Church and to open up his artistic vision of the spirituality of beauty, all the while grounded in these.

His principle of the freedom of the human being as God’s creature reveals an outlook on communication whereby the individual is a free, sharing in responsibility for God’s plan for that individual. He says in this regard: “Our free will is in no way forced or conditioned by grace; on the contrary, in spite of the almighty power of the hand of God's mercy, which touches, surrounds and captivates the soul with so many inspirations, calls and attractions, the human will remains perfectly free, its own master and beyond any state of compulsion…”

Therefore, the person who loves and is loved by God becomes free and is open to creativity, knowing that there is an interlocutor, God, with whom he or she relates, is spiritually nourished and with whom they build a life project.

The Trinity, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are a community profoundly united in love. Communication is the relationship of friendship in the community. For Francis, individuals participate in this loving and luminous friendship with the Divine Trinity. This communication-relationship includes a coherent and dynamic journey of love and communion in God, of communication-communion with others, of communication-compassion for human beings, of communication-charity for people.

Francis is best known as the saint of gentleness. Gentleness, at the level of communication, and in the general context of his work, can be seen as his great cognitive and emotional ability to listen to the echo of people's lives, in a colloquial relationship, understanding the concrete meaning of things, observing people, caring for and cherishing them. Integral communication is not manifested so much “in argumentative or discursive development, but seeks to communicate in tune with the frequency of things,  in the tone that translates the visibility and sonority proper to things”. When he talks about how to preach a good sermon, he makes some statements that show his deep emotional intelligence: “I cannot speak of God without emotion”, “our words must come from the heart rather than from the mouth. One has fine words, but the heart speaks to the heart and the tongue speaks only to the ears.” Let every sermon be “a sermon of love”.

Francis has a great sense of popular culture and a keen sensitivity for the real world of people. The Bishop of Geneva’s academic and classical formation did not cut him off from people and popular culture, and indeed he was very wisely able to grasp popular language, the simple and wise understanding of the people, the way they expressed themselves.  He said in this regard: it is “the farmers and those who work the land” who are the ones that told him that “when it snows just the right amount in winter, the harvest will be better the following year” (S III 97). As a good catechist and preacher and confessor, he was able to understand people’s language and desires. Most of the population in his time did not know how to read and write. He  immediately understood the difficulty people had in understanding Church doctrine. He insisted on the importance of communication in an “affective style”, which could touch people’s hearts and enthuse them (L V 117-120). And he asked that we write so that people can understand things in simple language, and write “according to the tastes of this poor world” using certain means to arouse the interest of the reader of the time” (L X 219). “I feel in love with souls a little more than usual…. Now my people’s heart is almost all mine.”

For Francis de Sales the human relationship should be natural and manifest fatherly and fraternal spontaneity. This attitude allows the communicator to be close to people, to arouse a sense of joy. This approach allows openness and trust in the relationship and puts the person in a state of welcoming the message. In spontaneity, people open up and manifest themselves with gratuitousness and joy. Francis had this to say about it: “I am arriving just now from doing catechism, where with our children we enjoyed making the audience laugh a little, making fun of the masks and dances; I was in a moment of good humour, and a large audience invited me with their applause to be a child with the children.… May God make me truly childlike in innocence and simplicity.”

Communicating is a gift and a task, building things up at a human spiritual and cultural level. Study is also prayer. He insists a great deal with his clergy on the imperative need for formation, education – and the solid formation of his priests. “Knowledge, he encouraged, is the eighth sacrament of the Church’s hierarchy”. Starting from his own experience of study and scientific exploration, he knew that in order to dialogue with culture and to respond to the spiritual and pastoral needs of the cultural context in which he lived, a spirituality of study was very important.

Communication for St Francis also concerned the dialogue between religion and the rich artistic and cultural heritage of his people. This is the viewpoint which he, along with his friend Antoine Favre, he founded an Academy in Annecy at the end of 1606, called the “Florimontaine”, “so that the muses may flourish on the mountains of Savoy”.

Communication is at the service of charity. For St Francis, loving our neighbour with charity means loving God in humankind and humankind in God. In the context of his time,  he is inspired by the vision of the Gospel as service to others, care for the poor and suffering, thus developing communication with a clear option for charity and solidarity. “Say frequently these divine words of the Saviour: I love, O Lord, Eternal Father, these people, because you love them, you have entrusted them to me as brothers and sisters and you wish me to love them as you love them” (Letter 1173 to Sister de Cevron-Villette, February-March 1616, in OEA XVII, 162).

Through his solid philosophical, theological and legal formation, and his experience of God, the Bishop of Geneva discovered that communication was the fundamental key to living spirituality, and for the evangelisation and governing of his diocese.