

Ecumenical Relationships and Dialogue Today: Insights from the Salesian Tradition

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In 1604 in Dijon, Francis de Sales (1567-1622) met Jane de Chantal (1572-1641) and a spiritual friendship began which still influences Christians four hundred years later.

Over the course of time, they developed a rich spiritual friendship which transformed the director as much as the directee... Indeed, the mutual affection and love which arose out of Francis' direction of Jane, seemed to possess a mystical quality... It was not so much that each encountered God in the other; rather, in the living out of the friendship, their boundaries were stretched which, in turn, created room for a new revelation from God.¹

The question examined in this paper is whether this new revelation has anything to say to the relationships that are at the core of the contemporary ecumenical movement.

Recently Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, noted, as have others before him, that

Without spirituality the ecumenical movement becomes merely an academic affair, where "normal" Christians cannot follow, where they feel excluded and finally frustrated; or it becomes a soulless activism, the business of an endless series of conferences, symposiums, gatherings, meetings and ever new documents which nobody can read. We need a spirituality of unity and communion, which is also a spirituality of prayer, forgiveness, of reconciliation and mutual acceptance of each other. If this is to be more than indifference about our differences, then it requires conversion and the opening of our hearts. There is no ecumenism without such conversions and renewal.²

This paper will examine the importance of insights on human encounter from the Salesian tradition for current ecumenical dialogue.³ Francis de Sales was certainly a man of his times, and the times were those of religious controversy and conflict. Yet,

Had he done only what was normal for his time, he would have been a champion of the Catholic Reformation, but would scarcely be thought of in connection with modern Ecumenism. He did do more, however, or rather, he did things differ-

1 Anthony F. LoPresti, "Spirituality Meets Ethics: Francis de Sales and Love for God" (Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 1999), 16-18. Also see Wendy M. Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal & François de Sales* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 33-36.

2 "Address of Walter Cardinal Kasper to the General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation," *Ecumenical Trends* 33/8 (September 2004): 14-15.

3 This paper will focus on the specifically Salesian contribution. Significant contemporary works on friendship include Paul J. Wadell, "Exploring the Mysteries of Intimacy," in his *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 39-65, and his *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989). Another important volume is Gilbert C. Meilaender, *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

ently. Religious controversy was not his main interest; he reserved first place for the teaching of charity and the devout life to Catholics and Protestants alike.⁴

Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life* was translated for Protestant use and his *Meditation on the Church* are noted for their lack of the abuse and hostility common at the time.⁵ The renowned ecumenist Yves Congar put it well when he said that if De Sales were to preach during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, "We can be sure of one thing: they would be thoughts and words dictated by his charity and his sole desire of following the indications of the will of God. Ecumenism claims no other justification."⁶ Perhaps today Salesian charity can help expand boundaries in such a way as to lead to conversion and renewal. To accomplish this purpose we will:

- note the importance of positive relationships of trust to ecumenical dialogue;
- review some of the ecumenical literature on the importance of building relationships;
- review some of the key points from the Salesian literature on human encounter;
- note contributions the Salesian perspective might make to the progress of ecumenical relationships; and
- offer a few conclusions.

The Catholic Church and Ecumenism

The Catholic Church formally entered the ecumenical movement with the "Decree on Ecumenism" of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).⁷ Since that time a host of ecumenical documents have appeared.⁸ The most important of these is Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (That They May Be One: On Commitment to Ecumenism).⁹ In this encyclical, John Paul reiterates the Catholic Church's irrevocable commitment "to following the path of the ecumenical venture, thus heeding the Spirit of the Lord" (n. 3). This "quest for Christian unity is not a matter of choice or expediency, but a duty which springs from the very nature of the Christian community" (n. 49).

John Paul develops the ecumenical stance of the Church at great length, noting especially how all our efforts must be rooted in spiritual ecumenism. Prayer is most important. For,

Besides the doctrinal differences needing to be resolved, Christians cannot underestimate the burden of long-standing misgivings inherited from the past, and

4 Ruth Kleinman, "The Ecumenism of Saint Francis de Sales," *Salesian Studies* 5/2 (Spring 1968): 42-49, at 47. Her major work is *Saint Francois de Sales and the Protestants* (Geneva: Dorz, 1962). Also see LoPresti, 250, and Francis de Sales' inaugural address as provost of the cathedral chapter, in which he insisted that the walls of Geneva must be taken by love. "Harangue pour le prévôté (Fin décembre 1593)," in *Oeuvres de saint François de Sales*, Edition complète, 27 vols. (Annecy: J. Nierat et al., 1892-1964), 7: 99-113.

5 Elisabeth Stopp, "The Context of Ecumenism," in her *A Man to Heal Differences: Essays and Talks on St. Francis de Sales* (Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press, 1997), 193-202, at 199.

6 Yves M. J. Congar, O.P. "St. Francis de Sales Today," *Salesian Studies* 3/1 (Winter 1966): 9.

7 *Unitatis Redintegratio in Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1975), 452-70.

8 See *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, eds. Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (New York: Paulist Press/Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1984), and *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*, eds. Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch (Geneva: World Council of Churches/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

9 Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1995.

of mutual misunderstandings and prejudices. Complacency, indifference and insufficient knowledge of one another often make the situation worse. Consequently, the commitment to ecumenism must be based upon the conversion of hearts and upon prayer, which will also lead to the necessary purification of past memories (n. 2).

Christians need to look truthfully at the painful past so that it does not continue as an obstacle in the present. Humble recognition of the truth of the past can prepare for reconciliation.

Love heals and moves us toward unity.

We proceed along the road leading to the conversion of hearts guided by love which is directed to God and, at the same time, to all our brothers and sisters, including those not in full communion with us. Love gives rise to the desire for unity... Love builds communion between individuals and between Communities. If we love one another we strive to deepen our communion and make it perfect. Love is given to God as the perfect source of communion—the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—that we may draw from that source the strength to build communion between individuals and Communities, or to re-establish it between Christians still divided. Love is the great undercurrent, which gives life and adds vigor to the movement toward unity (n. 21).

Love finds its deepest expression in prayer with our brothers and sisters. This is the soul of the ecumenical movement (n. 21). And in prayer “we are on the way to full unity” (n. 23). This prayer-filled path involves a true dialogue. This dialogue has a cognitive dimension but also an existential dimension. “It involves the human subject in his or her entirety; dialogue between communities involves in a particular way the subjectivity of each” (n. 28).

In their excellent *Introduction to Ecumenism*, Jeffrey Gros, Eamon McManus and Ann Riggs conclude that growth into what they consider the third stage of ecumenism requires a deeper conversion.¹⁰ This conversion is both personal and communal—a change of hearts and minds and of communal structures. They go on to say that

The spiritual disciplines which serve an ecumenical spiritual life include, in addition to prayer for ecumenism, prayer with other Christians, participation in and appreciation of the variety of worship styles and spiritual traditions, reading the biographies and spiritual resources of other traditions, cultivating a style of personal and Ecclesial hospitality, and finding experiences of dialogue to nourish one’s own ecumenical zeal and to expand one’s Ecclesial horizons.¹¹

Even the reading of ecumenical documents should be done prayerfully—with what I would call a contemplative attitude.

10 Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Eamon McManus and Ann Riggs, *Introduction to Ecumenism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 245. For another good overview from a Catholic perspective, see Frederick M. Bliss, SM, *Catholic and Ecumenical, History and Hope: Why the Catholic Church is Ecumenical and What She Is Doing About IT* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1999). Also see Michael Kinnamon who argues that obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, no matter how it might disrupt our normal patterns of Church life, is what is needed today. He goes on to say, “...we too often speak of growth without repentance and conversion,” This can be found in Chapter 5, “Unity and Repentance: Why ‘Growth’ Is the Wrong Metaphor,” of his provocative book *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 115.

11 Gros, McManus and Riggs, 246.

Spiritual Ecumenism

Similar strains of thought can be seen in other authors as well. Gwen Cashmore and Joan Puls, writing in the *Dictionary of Ecumenism*, says that spirituality is the endeavor to live in obedience to the Gospel. “The whole of life is to be placed at the disposal of the Gospel. Spirituality, then, is the way people take to be Christian, to fulfill their Christian vocation. It embraces ministry and service, relationships, lifestyle, prayer and response to the political and social environment.”¹²

Diane Kessler, United Church of Christ pastor and executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, echoes many of the themes just mentioned in her article “Ecumenical Spirituality: The Quest for Wholeness of Vision”: “Ecumenism deals with healing relationships—between Christians, among churches, for the sake of the world. Christian spirituality deals with a relationship—with the Triune God we know through Jesus Christ—and through God, to each other.”¹³ Often these relationships need healing. Our communion with God enables us to transform our relationship with others.”¹⁴ Kessler continues: “Fr. Emmanuel Sullivan has observed that “friendship has proved itself an indispensable element in the process of Christian unity. Dr. [Paul] Crow is a master of Christian hospitality, and has paid special attention to this ancient and artful tradition—an essential element in the cultivation of Christian friendship—throughout his ministry.”¹⁵

Yet Kessler notes that ecumenical work also throws people into unfamiliar situations where they do not know people and where the ways of prayer, culture, language and so forth are not very familiar. This is one of the challenges of the ecumenical movement. It can be overcome by spiritual discipline. I should also note that Dr. Crow mentioned in a recent public presentation that it was important to have good friends to go to when ecumenical work is discouraging and we need to put difficulties into perspective.

Kessler contends that ecumenical work calls one to practice the virtue of humility. The spiritual life involves change. One can come to a deeper humility overtime. Likewise one should not forget the joy. Joyful moments should be treasured as gifts of God. They are to be savored.

Ecumenical Literature: The Importance of Relationships

Some people are not sure what the word “ecumenism” means these days. Some consider it to involve conversations with anyone who is not of the same faith—whether Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Muslim or the adherent of an Eastern religion. Technically, ecumenism concerns itself with our relationships with fellow Christians and our search for Christian unity—or full communion as we say in today’s language.

12 Gwen Cashmore and Joan Puls, “Spirituality in the Ecumenical Movement,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd ed., eds. Nicholas Lossky, Jose Miguel Bonino, John Pobee, Tom F. Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright and Pauline Webb (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 1070. Also see Regis Ladous’ “Spiritual Ecumenism,” in the same volume, 1069-70.

13 *The Vision of Christian Unity: Essays in Honor of Paul A. Crow, Jr.*, eds. Thomas F. Best and Theodore J. Nottingham (Indianapolis: Oikoumene Publications, 1997), 91-103, at 91.

14 Kessler quoting Paul Crow, 93.

15 *Ibid.*, 97.

For some Christians the word “ecumenism,” as used in its proper sense, has overtones of relativism. This is sometimes expressed as “We all share the same God so these differences between Christians are not that important.” This is not, one should quickly note, the attitude of the Catholic Church and its partners in serious ecumenical dialogue.

Other Christians are not sure what ecumenism means for them personally. People may feel a call to be involved in ecumenical relationships. Yet, they fear that they will not be able to explain their faith adequately—and they will be embarrassed. Or they fear that they will “give someone away” in ecumenical dialogue that is really important. These fears can be overcome by building trusting relationships with others.

A few years ago, St. John’s Benedictine Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, invited nineteen persons of varied Christian traditions to come together for a week in each of three consecutive summers to discuss “Virtues for an Ecumenical Heart.” What they found they could share were their stories—I would say their spiritual journeys—and thus they built friendships with one another.¹⁶ In the book that shares their stories and their experience, there are a number of conclusions that bear on our topic of ecumenical relationships. The following are particularly noteworthy:

1. The virtues are lived in daily life. “Virtues are practices more than principles. You have to dig into the stories, not soar above them to find the virtues” (6).
2. Reaching out to others is most important. “We can put more effort into what binds us together than into what separates us. Reaching across diminishes our fears and increases our appreciation of our own gifts when we see them through the eyes of others” (7). We are more complete when we are reaching out “because when we are together we are more than the sum of our parts” (7).
3. People were asked to share their lives and how they cultivated the virtues of an ecumenical heart in their lives.
4. Peoples’ hearts cannot grow ecumenically if they are apart. Thus there is need for more opportunities for people to spend time together so that they can really get to know one another.
5. “Fear subsided as we became friends. We did not experience a compromise of our individual identities, but rather a celebration and appreciation of them” (10).
6. “Little by little we began to see our own story in the story of the other” (15).
7. People learned that ecumenical hearts thrive on openness, in a willingness to share even the flawed parts of our lives (18). As people shared their life’s journeys, they were changed.
8. “Ecumenism...has need of mentors. Persons who seem to have an affinity for ecumenism can look to their own lives and find that mentors, known in the

¹⁶ *Stories from Christian Neighbors: A Heart for Ecumenism*, eds. Vera Duncanson, Brian Johnson and Stefanie Weisgram (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003). Page references are given in parentheses.

flesh or through books or other media, have helped them..." (37) There are stories of holy people in all the varied Christian traditions.

9. Growth in virtues takes a long time and requires the encouragement of the community (38).
10. Virtues require conversion—turning away from my focus on self or on my own tradition—so that I can truly see the other (92). And so that I can see the Holy Spirit at work in the other and in myself.

Friendship in Salesian Thought

Friendship is a central element in Salesian spiritual theology. Francis de Sales gives some extended consideration to friendship in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part III.¹⁷ His letters and other works show references to the topic of friendship and, perhaps more significantly, to Francis in his friendships to others. Terence A. McGoldrick offers an exhaustive analysis in his *The Sweet and Gentle Struggle: Francis de Sales on the Necessity of Spiritual Friendship*.¹⁸ He believes that "friendship is truly the fulcrum of his [de Sales'] spirituality."¹⁹ Wendy M. Wright offers the best work on the friendship of St. Francis and St. Jane in her *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal & Francois de Sales*.

To be a Christian was, for Francois de Sales, to be a fully realized human being, for in living out his or her all to a devout life, a man or woman was becoming the lover of God that he or she was created to be. A Christian friendship was a bond with another person cultivated within the context of the ultimate vocation of becoming fully human. The bond itself became part of the vocation. The key to comprehending what Francois de Sales meant is to found in his equation of friendship with love. It can thus be part of the total process of becoming the pure lover of God that humankind, in the Salesian view, is intended to be. But this is a more complex assertion than it may seem on the surface, for the concepts of friendship and love have long histories in the Christian world.²⁰

We will not be able to survey those histories here. Others have done so.²¹ As with our survey of ecumenism above, we will only be able to give a brief summary of the Salesian idea and reality of friendship.

A central concept in Salesian friendship is well expressed by LoPresti when he says that

Loving, trust-filled relationships, friendships like Francis and Jane's which provide a safe place for vulnerability, can be a privilege locus for hearing the ever-ancient, ever-new word of God... Much as we learn how to become lovers of God through the special relationships we have in our families, so also we become

17 Trans. and ed., with an introduction and notes, by John K. Ryan (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1972; rpt., 2003).

18 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996). Here we refer especially to "Part Three: The Salesian Theory of Friendship," 381-493. Page references are given in parentheses.

19 McGoldrick, 385.

20 Wright, 104.

21 For a succinct discussion of the development of the terms "friendship" and "love," see Wright, 104-118. For a more detailed exposition, see McGoldrick, "Part One: The Sources of the Salesian Concept of Friendship," 1-135.

lovers of God through the special relationship we share with spiritual directors and spiritual friends.²²

Nancy Bowden notes that this friendship is not exclusive. In fact, true friends reach out others.

Inclusiveness, reaching out to others and developing relationships, is one of the core components of Salesian spirituality. The relational quality of Salesian friendship excludes the fusion that keeps persons in dependency: rather, it encourages expansiveness and interdependence. The wide circle of relationships within which the bishop and the baroness operated is evident from the correspondence with their directed and with each other. These letters, written in a spirit of friendship, helped to create a network, an extended Salesian family.²³

From the extensive work of McGoldrick, we will identify several key elements that might be of relevance to our comparative study:

- A. "Friendship holds a decided place in Christian growth for Francis de Sales" (387). This is growth in love and involves movement. We do not stay the same. There are degrees of union of heart, mind and soul between friends (405). Thus friendships can differ one from the other.
- B. The mystical life is daily life with all its events, sufferings, friendships, and separations. Grace, the love of God, is at work in daily life (387). "Fidelity to the situation in which one finds oneself was, in the bishop's eyes, the perfect opportunity for the self-denial that was necessary for growth. The prelate himself practiced this obvious yet unglamorous form of asceticism."²⁴ Virtues are not ends in themselves but help one to embrace the will of God, which becomes evident in daily life.²⁵
- C. Friendship interacts; it requires familiar communication. Friendships differ according to what is communicated, the goods that are shared. "We become like the person we communicate with in mutual love" (393). We pour our hearts into one another (402). Yet we cannot be completely happy in this life.
- D. We shouldn't be surprised if "little accidents" disappoint us in friendship—despite our best intentions (395). Also there is always a certain restlessness in any relationship because our ultimate rest and complete union with God and neighbor is in heaven.

McGoldrick summarizes the first part of his analysis thusly:

In summary, both movements of love unite persons in the things loved by some kind of participation that opens their hearts to each other's influence. They must resemble each other in some way at first, to permit love's equalizing power to take effect. Then by speaking or even normal conversation the interior and

22 Lopresti, 191.

23 Nancy J. Bowden, "'Ma Très Chère Fille': The Spirituality of Francois de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal and the Enablement of Women" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1995), 270.

24 Wright, 67.

25 Ibid., 81, 170.

spiritual world of love is expressed. Speaking communicates and shares what love shares, themselves and the things they appreciate, most effectively. They share their worlds, feelings and impressions influencing one another and progressing in degrees of unity. Finally through friendship's exchanged love, union reaches its highest possible degree in the human condition, where there is such a harmony of thoughts and feelings that one can say that a friend is another self. However this union is always imperfect and therefore has its sorrows. All love's movement to union depends upon one first being at peace with himself and able to love. Friendship as the most perfect kind of love unites all these aspects of love's dynamic. But before one can love he must be pleased with himself (408).

E. The first cause of friendship is God (408). Yet it requires our daily effort (409).

F. Not only should one speak to another and express one's affection and good will but "also the very interior affection planted by grace should be nourished by deliberate acts like contemplating their qualities or how we may be of service to them" (409).

G. "However, since progress is possible in friendship, this might be a case where someone who repulsed us at first is indeed capable of becoming a great friend if only we persevere a little in the beginning" (418). Communication here is absolutely necessary.

H. Friendship communicates love, vocation, resolution and quality (422). The fundamental resolution is to make God the center of one's life and the basis of mutual communication. "Friendship is the perfect love of our neighbor..." (427). Friends give thanks to Christ who is the "friend of friends" (431). Friends share in the love of the Trinity (446).

I. Friends do correct one another from time to time. "The kind of understanding only friendship's long involvement knows is the key to measuring what the person is ready to hear, choosing the occasion to say it, even collaborating with other friends to bear acrid words as gently as possible. 'For,' he advises, 'it is something very hard for a person to see themselves corrected'" (461). Friends also put up with one another's faults.

J. Humility is thus an important virtue for growth in friendship.

McGoldrick argues toward the end of his lengthy discussion, that while not necessary for salvation, friendship is important for salvation in De Sales' thinking. Grace and charity transform human love (489).

[Francis] saw friendship only as spiritual friendship. Augustine's great innovation, that God alone can join two persons, was Francis' interpretation of every encounter, and every attraction he experienced for others. He believed God had made his heart that way; to love his people with great tenderness. And this love was in its highest form where benevolence could go the farthest, where love could be given and bear fruit in return. Friendship is the only love that has this reciprocity. It's very nature is to communicate, to render equal, to engage, to correct, to console and to stimulate to do better. ...its victories over misunderstanding or conflict bestow a lasting benefit to the hearts of those committed to taking pains to understand, to forgive, and to humbly accept correction (495-96).

Comparison

In ecumenical circles, people speak of levels of dialogue.²⁶ There is the dialogue of charity in which the representatives of the various Christian traditions strive for mutual understanding, and for acknowledgment, forgiveness, and healing of past sins and offenses. This dialogue of love underlies all ecumenical work. Subsequently there's is the dialogue of truth where the participants seek the truth of Christ even if it leads them to difficult places and calls for reevaluation of positions held in their specific Christian tradition.²⁷ Thus there is an ongoing process in institutional dialogue.

A similar process is evident in personal dialogue as well. Persons of different Christian traditions first need to get to know one another. As noted above, individuals can come to mutual understanding by first sharing the stories of God's work in their lives. The ten points drawn from *Stories from Christian Neighbors* above are results of such a process.

This process depends in many ways on the trust and confidence the participants build for one another. In particular we can see that what the participants learned about relationships with each other coheres well with Salesian spirituality. The participants also realized that:

- a. The virtues are lived in daily life (1).²⁸ It is here that divine grace is at work (B). This perception, both of Francis de Sales and the ecumenists gathered at St. John's Abbey, runs counter to a contemporary trend noted by Cardinal Kasper—people nowadays often think of God as being distant, at a remove from daily life. The contention here is that Divine Providence is very much at work in peoples' daily lives and that we can help one another to see and live that grace. Jesus is a friend who is near, not far away.²⁹
- b. Reaching out to others is most important (2). It was important that people be invited into conversation and dialogue with one another. The nineteen participants were invited to St. John's. They replied positively to the invitation. In all friendship, there is an element of risk. We freely choose to invite others or to accept an invitation. Once the invitation is accepted, we may find that we do not relate to an individual or group so well at the beginning. Sometimes it takes time to build relationships or to see the good in others (G). Key elements in this situation include effective communication with each other and listening for the inner movement of the Spirit in our thoughts and affections.
- c. People were asked to share their lives and how they cultivated the virtues (3). Such communication is essential to friendship (C). In sharing the story of God's work in our lives, we begin to build a positive relationship. We are sharing both the good things that God has done for us and the lessons that we have learned in living our lives. In so doing, we are sharing the divine love we have received with others for their well-being.

26 See *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 60. Also see John F. Hotchkin, "From Organization Through Dialogue to Decision: The Third Stage of Ecumenism," in *People, Programs and Papers from the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Colledgeville, MN* (November 1995), 10-16.

27 For an extensive discussion of ecumenical dialogues, see *Ut Unum Sint*, nn. 28-81.

28 Numbers here refer to the ten critical points from the discussions at St. John's Abbey noted above. The letters indicate the key elements drawn from the Salesian teaching, also above.

29 See Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Friend We Have in Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

- d. People need to spend time together to grow ecumenically (4). People need to take time to get to know one another and to build the trust that leads to sharing and growth. How might we characterize the friendships here? I would consider them a form of collegueship.³⁰ The participants have a common interest in Christian unity and are willing to set aside the time and work at learning from one another in light of this common concern. While I would not consider this the deepest form of friendship, it is a form of love appropriate to ecumenical dialogue. Such relationships will differ from one another, as no two individuals are the same (A).
- e. Through friendship we come to a deeper appreciation of our own identity (5). Friends often see us more clearly than we see ourselves. They can encourage us to develop our latent talents and gifts. The Holy Spirit can be at work on us through our ecumenical friends so that we can go deeper in our spiritual journeys with Christ. All this requires a certain humility (J) as we recognize divine grace coming through a community and through individuals we might not have expected.
- f. Thus gradually we might see our story in the story of the other (6). And we might see all our stories as relating us more deeply to God. The fundamental point is to see one another in God. We give thanks to Jesus for such friendship (H).
- g. These friendships involve sharing even our flaws and our past sins (7). For individuals and for groups, as noted above, this is the prelude to a deeper inversion, a necessary element of spiritual ecumenical growth. A concomitant element is that ecumenical collegueship too will involve disappointments in relationship—for we are far from perfect and we can, even quite unintentionally, disappoint or offend one another (D). The need for forgiveness and healing is ongoing, as we will not be at rest until we attain to complete union with God in heaven.
- h. Ecumenism needs mentors (8). These may be living or deceased.³¹ This paper contends that Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal and their teaching on friendship offers a type of mentoring that can be beneficial for ecumenists. Salesian friendship resembles the ecumenical movement—in that it builds a network of friends. For example, there is an affective element to friendship. We are drawn internally to be friends with certain individuals. We must, of course, discern these feelings to see that they are from God. Such positive affections for others can be nourished by reflection on the good qualities of our colleagues. Likewise we might seek ways to serve them and the ecumenical movement. Some individual friendships may draw us more deeply than others into the life of prayer and service.
- i. Growth in virtue takes time (9) and daily effort (F). It is rooted in grace—the cause of our friendship is God. Yet it relies on our free cooperation. The soul

³⁰ See my *Friendship: The Key to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 46-48.

³¹ See Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), for a clear and engaging discussion of mentors, both living and deceased, who have directly affected his life.

is never static, it is always going forward or backward, growing in love for God or declining. Such spiritual growth may be essential—ecumenists are either coming closer to Christ in the Spirit of love or regressing.

- j. Conversion comes from the Spirit and opens us further to divine guidance (10). The process of conversion is ongoing. It enables us to see the other more deeply and ourselves as well. Deep conversion is a prelude to one of the more difficult elements in friendship—correcting one another. This requires great sensitivity because it is always difficult to accept correction (I) and I think even more difficult in an ecumenical context. Yet if we are to engage in a common search for the truth of Jesus Christ, we will need to correct one another and accept correction. This will involve humility on the part of all as well as a deep trust that we are seeking together to do God's will.

What Salesian friendship also offers is some indication of the signs of a spiritual deepening of relationship among colleagues. Friends move toward becoming holy together. Salesian spirituality offers contours for this growth and an example of the depth of its possibilities. I don't believe that all will be called by God to a deeper friendship but I would think that some individuals might be. We know that each Christian tradition has witnesses to holiness, people who have become like Christ. These people are witnesses to the community. Perhaps in our era, some individuals will be the "ecumenical saints" who have grown in holiness together across Christian boundaries.

Conclusion

In Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal, we can see an epitome of the holiness that can be the fruit of friendship with God and one another.

I would suggest that the male/female spiritual friendship has as one of its principal dynamics this stripping away of one's habituated way of being. With Jeanne de Chantal and Francois de Sales, the whole range of that complex phenomenon, love, was made operative in their union. The pure love of God provided the overarching goal and context for their association; a fully experienced desire for each other's presence leavened and propelled them; their love for each other as equals with a shared life task bonded them more deeply; the conscious recognition of the other expressions that a man and woman's love might take was present but not acted upon. All these modalities of love existed in their friendship. Like two skillful dancers threading their way artfully through the articulate patterns of several simultaneous dances, Francois and Jeanne lived out the full range of human and divine love of which the Christian tradition knew.³²

This spiritual depth is not something that we expect in all our ecumenical friendships. Normally a certain unobtrusive spiritual growth might be concomitant with growth in ecumenical friendships. But we might be surprised if a greater spiritual depth did not manifest itself occasionally. This manifestation may be the key to moving from the current level of ecumenical dialogue to full communion.

32 Wright, 204.