

# De Sales

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## SPIRITUALITY CENTER

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*"A Model...of Civility"*



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Mary D. Ford

M. Scott Peck, M.D., claims that "something is seriously wrong with our society." In his book entitled, A World Waiting to Be Born, (Bantam, 1993) the author identifies what he believes is a corrosive cancer that threatens our families, schools, workplaces, communities and social institutions: *incivility*.

It seems that wherever we look, people are locked in combat. Whether in rancorous debate on the floor of the House of Representatives, rush-hour obscenities exchanged in traffic, the rise of teenage violence or the antics of daytime television we appear to be losing the ability to treat one another in a civil manner. Courtesy, politeness and respect are retreating to a "take no prisoners" approach to personal, familial or political competition and conflict.

What is the remedy to this state of affairs? First, we need to constantly remind ourselves that God created us out of love. Second, we need to constantly remember that every person we encounter possesses God-given dignity and worth. Third, we need to demonstrate these truths by treating one another in a respectful, civil manner.

St. Francis de Sales (1567 - 1622) is a model of civility. Although he witnessed—and experienced—tremendous turmoil during his lifetime, he is celebrated for his unwavering attempts to treat others with profound respect, good manners and a kind demeanor, even in the midst of conflict. (This quality later earned him the title of "The Gentleman Saint", whose feast day is observed on January 24.)

He believed that Jesus' command to "love one another" is most frequently demonstrated by the practice of civility, relating to our parents, spouses, children, co-workers, friends—even enemies—in a just, dignified and hospitable manner.

St. Francis de Sales' advice for promoting civility in families, schools, communities and social structures is just as powerful and practical in our own day as it was nearly 400 years ago. The single best source for his down-to-earth wisdom can be found in his Introduction to the Devout Life, first published in 1608. Just a sampling of his guidance and encouragement include:

\* "While it is important to resist

evil and address the faults of others, we must do so peacefully."

\* "When you encounter difficulties and contradictions do not be in a rush to violently attack them; rather, bend them with gentleness and time."

\* "You can attract more flies with a teaspoon of honey than with a barrel of vinegar."

The roots for *civility* means "members of a household." We are members of the household of God, citizens with the saints, who are called to "Live Jesus," to build the City of God here on earth even as we anticipate our everlasting home in heaven.

Our commitment to relate with one another in respectful, just and loving ways can be a powerful remedy indeed for a world increasingly threatened by hostility, rancor and violence. Blessed are we to have St. Francis de Sales as our companion and guide as we attempt "to walk on the way with our brothers and sisters gently, peacefully and amiably" each and every day!

May God help us to recognize that civility is an essential foundation for the practice of charity.