



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of March 1, 2013,
Month of Saint Joseph

Dear Friends,

KING Henry IV called Saint Francis de Sales “the phoenix of Bishops”, because, he said, “he is a rare bird on this earth.” After renouncing the pomp of Paris and the king’s offer of a prestigious episcopal see, he became the tireless pastor and evangelizer of his native Savoy, which he loved above all. Guided by the Fathers of the Church, he found in prayer and in deeply meditated knowledge of Scripture the strength he needed to accomplish his mission and lead the people to God (cf. Blessed John Paul II, *Letter to the Bishop of Annecy*, November 23, 2002).

Francis de Sales was born on August 21, 1567, in Château de Sales, about twenty kilometers north of Annecy, into a Catholic family that belonged to the nobility of Savoy. He was the eldest of six brothers and sisters. The governing principle his parents used in raising their children was to explain the reason why they demanded certain things, so that their children’s obedience might be better thought out. At a very early age, Francis learned how to use a sword, but also how to give alms to the poor—if he heard a poor person call out, he left the table to bring him some of his meal. However, he wasn’t perfect—one day, he entered the kitchen, being forbidden to, and asked the cook for a little succulent pie that was still steaming. The burning he felt didn’t keep him from taking it in his hand and eating it. He then went to his mother to have her tend to the burn, without revealing its cause.

The Memorare

Francois made his first communion and received confirmation at the age of ten. It was then that he began to discern a call to the priesthood. Around 1582, his father, who planned a career in law for his son, sent him to study at Clermont College, a Jesuit school in Paris. There he learned grammar and mathematics, the ancient languages, philosophy, and theology. The difficult question of the relationship between God’s will, divine grace, and human freedom troubled him to the point of plunging him into despair. He thought himself damned to hell for eternity. For six weeks, seized by severe anxiety, he barely ate or slept. One evening in January 1587, prostrate before a picture of MARY in the Church of Saint-Étienne-des-Grès, he made an act of total abandonment to the Lord, then recited the Memorare, a prayer full of confidence to MARY composed by Saint Bernard. Immediately the violent temptation evaporated, and he



Saint Francis de Sales

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regained his peace of heart. He then vowed his virginity to God and the Virgin MARY, to whom he promised a daily rosary. From this trial, Francis learned compassion for the spiritual sufferings of others, and would be able to allay them.

In 1588, the young man left to finish his studies in Padua, Italy. There, he placed himself under the direction of the Jesuit priest Antonio Possevino, with whom he did the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius. In the summer of 1591, he received his doctorate in civil and canon law. On Francis’ return to Savoy in 1592, his father gave him a small estate, the Manor of Villaroget, where he had set up a law library, for his heart’s desire was for his son to become a lawyer, or even a senator. He had also chosen a fiancée for him, the only daughter of a judge and counsel to the duke of Savoy. In spite of the nobility and virtue of this young lady, not yet fourteen years old, Francis, who had decided to consecrate himself to God, did not pursue her. To oblige his father, he registered as an attorney with the Chambery bar, but refused the nomination to the senate that the duke of Savoy offered him. During a courtesy call to Bishop de Granier, who although bishop of Geneva lived in Annecy, Francis’ wisdom and range of knowledge impressed the bishop. Soon the prelate asked him to accept the post of provost, i.e., the lead canon of the cathedral (the equivalent of being the vicar general today). At this time, Francis revealed to his father his true vocation. After a difficult interior struggle, his father renounced the idea

of making his son a brilliant magistrate, and gave him his blessing.

Preach to the eyes

Francis was ordained a priest on December 18, 1593, and officially installed as the provost of the cathedral canons. In a talk he gave during his installation ceremony, he discussed his views on how to win the city of Geneva back to the Catholic faith. Since 1541, the reformer John Calvin had made Geneva the "Protestant Rome," and the bishop had to take refuge in Annecy. "It is by charity that the walls of Geneva will be breached," the new provost declared, "By love the city will be invaded, it is by love that it must be reconquered! ... The walls of Geneva must be breached by ardent prayer and stormed with brotherly love." The Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel I, also wanted to reestablish Catholicism in the Chablais, a region south of Lake Geneva, which had turned Calvinist in the mid-century. He asked Bishop de Granier to send missionaries there. Francis de Sales and his cousin, Louis de Sales, gladly went on this mission. In September 1594, they set up camp in the fortress of Allinges. From there, Francis went to Thonon, the capital of Chablais, where he preached in the only Catholic church in the town. Soon, a public ordinance from the town's Calvinist consistory forbade Protestants from going to hear his sermons. After four months, Francis had not achieved any tangible results. Then a friend advised him to preach to eyes rather than ears, by composing articles on leaflets to be distributed under the doors of Calvinist homes. On January 7th, while celebrating Mass, Francis heard an interior voice confirm this plan. From his very first articles, he captured the attention of his readers. Some of these writings would be gathered and republished under the title *The Catholic Controversy*. In these articles, Francis, who had studied the works of some thirty Protestant authors, extensively quoted Holy Scripture and many Catholic theologians. When Blessed Pope Pius IX proclaimed Saint Francis de Sales Doctor of the Church, he would say of *The Catholic Controversy*, "A marvelous theological science shines through this work; one sees in it excellent method and irresistible logic, both in refuting heresy and in demonstrating Catholic truth."

Francis' strong arguments enlightened many of his contemporaries, and remain valuable today for understanding the true faith. In the first part of his work, he denounces the weaknesses of Calvinist positions. In particular, he points out that their ministers hold no authority, because they have not received a mission: "It is certain", he wrote, "that whoever wishes to teach and hold the rank of pastor in the Church must be sent." But the Calvinist pastors had received no mission from the Church, and cannot claim an extraordinary mission, for "no one should allege an extraordinary mission without proving it by miracles," and "never must any extraordinary mission be accepted if it is disowned by the ordinary authority which is in the Church of Our Lord." In

the second part of his work, he presents the foundations of Catholicism and affirms that the Church cannot err. Saint Paul calls the Church the *pillar and bulwark of the truth* (I Tim. 3:15). "Is not this to say that truth is solidly upheld in the Church? Elsewhere, truth is only intermittently maintained, it falls often, but in the Church it is without vicissitude, unmovable, unshaken, in short steadfast and perpetual." In the third part, which he never finished, he addresses controversial issues, especially Purgatory.

As soon as he could, Francis settled in Thonon, in the home of an elderly female relative. He was aided by four priests, to whom he gave advice drawn from his experience: "I assure you," he told them, "that never have I responded sharply without regretting it later. One accomplishes more with love and charity than with severity and harshness." Gradually, the residents of Chablais returned to Catholicism. At the end of September 1598, the Duke of Savoy organized a gorgeous celebration in Thonon, with a solemn procession of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Fifteen thousand people had already returned to Catholicism, and many others were determined to join them.

In November 1598, Bishop de Granier sent his provost to Rome to make in his place the *ad limina* visit that bishops make to the Pope every five years. The bishop asked the Holy Father to make Francis his coadjutor (his future successor). The Pope summoned Francis for an official examination. On the appointed day, Francis entered a church and prayed, "My Lord, if in your eternal Providence you know that I shall be a worthless servant in the episcopacy ... do not allow me to answer correctly; but rather make it that I am covered with confusion before your Vicar, and that I receive nothing from this examination but ignominy." At the end of the meeting, the Holy Father, extremely satisfied, named him coadjutor bishop of Geneva.

Winning hearts

At the beginning of 1602, Bishop de Granier sent Francis de Sales to Paris, to King Henry IV, to arrange that property that had been confiscated by the Protestants in Gex (a region of the diocese of Geneva that, in civil terms, belonged to the King of France) be returned to the clergy, and that Catholics be granted complete religious freedom. Francis was asked to preach the Lenten sermons in the queen's chapel. "He won over more hearts in one hour through love than others in forty days through rigor," one of his biographers reported. It was not that he was indulgent toward vice, but he knew well that wherever a single spark of divine love could be thrown, sin would soon be wiped out. He met Barbara Acarie (the future Blessed Mary of the Incarnation), the mother of a family who had received extraordinary mystical gifts. He helped her to introduce into France the Carmelite Order, that had been reformed by Saint Teresa of Avila. Henry IV proposed that Francis

become Bishop of Paris. “Sire,” he replied, “I have married a poor wife (the Church of Geneva), and I cannot desert her for a richer one.”

With Bishop de Granier’s death on September 17, 1602, Francis de Sales became the Bishop of Geneva. He made a long twenty-day retreat according to the *Exercises* of Saint Ignatius. During the ceremony for his episcopal consecration, he was granted an intellectual vision—he perceived that the Most Holy Trinity was effecting interiorly in his soul that which the consecrating bishops were doing externally. He became the pastor of a poor diocese in the midst of turmoil, in a mountainous landscape whose austerity and beauty was very familiar with. He would write, “I encountered God in all His sweetness and tact in our highest and most rugged mountains, where many simple souls love and adore Him in all truth and sincerity; and mountain goats and chamois leap here and there between terrifying glaciers to sing his praise.”

An astonishing vehemence

Bishop de Sales never missed an opportunity to teach his faithful, in whom he noted religious ignorance, the root of many evils. He introduced catechism courses, and enjoyed instructing children himself—he won their hearts and then explained in a friendly manner the basics of the faith, using comparisons suited to their abilities. In 1603, he convened a diocesan synod for his priests. He wanted to encourage them, since many lived a quite solitary life in the mountains. With astonishing vehemence, he exhorted them to study and to be on their guard against doctrinal errors, and advised great purity of conscience in administering the sacrament of Penance. He recommended that they receive penitents “with great love, patiently enduring their uncouthness, ignorance, imbecility, slowness, and other imperfections,” gradually and tactfully questioning them about certain sins they might otherwise not dare to reveal.

In March 1604, the Bishop of Geneva went to Dijon to preach a Lenten mission. One morning, after he had celebrated Mass, the Lord revealed to him that he would found a religious order for women. While preaching, he noticed a young woman in widow’s garb, who was listening to him with fervent attention. Jane Frances de Chantal, whose husband had died tragically in a hunting accident, had prayed to the Lord to give her a spiritual guide, and God had shown her Francis de Sales, whom she recognized as soon as she saw him in the pulpit. Many other people also came to Francis de Sales for spiritual guidance, and he wrote short spiritual treatises for them. One of these was the origin of *Introduction to the Devout Life*, a work published in December 1608.

This book, addressed to a fictional recipient, Philothea, is an invitation to belong completely to God while living in the world and fulfilling the duties of one’s state in life. The language and style used are very simple. The book was an immediate success—during

Francis de Sales’ lifetime, the work would be reprinted more than forty times, and translated into virtually every language in Europe. King Henry IV himself read it, and the queen of France offered the King of England a copy decorated with diamonds.

On March 1, 1610, Francis was with his mother at her deathbed. He would write the Baroness of Chantal, “my heart swelled and I wept over this good mother more than I have done since I was ordained; but it was without spiritual bitterness, thanks be to God.” On Sunday June 6th, he founded, with Madame de Chantal and Charlotte de Brécharde, the Visitation Order. His plan was simple: “To create a small group or congregation of women and girls experimenting life together under a small pious constitution.” They would chant the Little Office of Our Lady and live together in “holy and cordial interior union.” Finally, they would admit into their community women of fragile health, who could not enter more austere convents. He placed this Order, which was to be dedicated to contemplation, but also to various charitable works for the poor and sick, under the patronage of the Visitation “because in visiting the poor, the sisters must imitate MARY when She visited Elizabeth.”

If it please God

At the beginning of 1615, Mother de Chantal founded a Visitation convent in Lyons. But soon, the archbishop, Bishop de Marquemont, wished to introduce changes to the Order, notably to establish a strict cloister, which would mean no more visits to the sick and poor. Bishop de Sales, who was very detached from his personal views if they did not seem essential, wrote to the Superior in Lyons: “If it please God that this congregation change its name, state, and condition, you will conform to the archbishop’s pleasure, to which the entire congregation is totally devoted.” He himself would write to Bishop de Marquemont: “As for visits to the sick, these were added more as an exercise suited to the devotion of those who began this congregation and to the places where they were, than as a primary purpose.” The Visitandines accepted the changes their founder had agreed to. Before Bishop de Sales’ death, a dozen Visitations would be founded.

In 1616, Francis de Sales published, especially for Mother de Chantal and her religious, *Treatise on the Love of God*.

“In an intensely flourishing season of mysticism,” said Pope Benedict XVI, “*Treatise on the Love of God* was a true and proper *summa* and at the same time a fascinating literary work. Saint Francis’ description of the journey towards God starts from recognition of the ‘natural inclination’ (*ibid.*, Book 1, chapter XVI), planted in man’s heart—although he is a sinner—to love God above all things. According to the model of Sacred Scripture, Saint Francis de Sales speaks of the union between God and man, developing a whole series of

images and interpersonal relationships. His God is Father and Lord, husband and friend, who has the characteristics of mother and of wet-nurse and is the sun of which even the night is a mysterious revelation. Such a God draws man to Himself with bonds of love, namely, true freedom, for 'love has neither convicts nor slaves, but brings all things under its obedience with a force so delightful, that as nothing is so strong as love nothing also is so sweet as its strength'" (General Audience, March 2, 2011).

Always available

Bishop de Sales lived a life of poverty. He kept his clothes a very long time, at times mending them himself. His chaplain dared to respectfully reproach him for being "the worst dressed of all in the house." He celebrated the Mass with incomparable devotion. Every day, towards the middle of the morning, he made himself available to receive priests. His welcome was simple and fraternal. "Where do you think you are?" he asked a priest who did not know what courtesies to show him. "We are all brothers... Come now, between just us two, I am not a bishop; these formalities are good when we appear in public." In the afternoon, he received all who called on him. He had the gift of lifting hearts and discerning spirits with a great spiritual wisdom. His reputation for holiness drew many sick to him—a number of whom he miraculously cured, attributing the cures to God alone, Who can perform miracles for those who pray to Him with faith. After the afternoon audiences, the prelate visited the sick in their homes, even if they were living in sordid and inconvenient places, as well as prisoners. Then he made himself available for confessions. For that matter, he was always available for this ministry. In the evenings, before going to bed, even if it was very late, he peacefully said the rosary meditating on the mysteries.

At the end of 1618, Francis de Sales went to Paris for the wedding of the son of Duke Charles Emmanuel I with the sister of King Louis XIII. There he met Saint Vincent de Paul, who said about him: "Bishop de Sales

is so well conformed to this model [of Christ], as I have seen for myself, that often I have wondered with astonishment how a simple creature could achieve such a great degree of perfection, given human fragility, and reach the summit of such a sublime height... The thought came to me: 'My God, how good You are since in Bishop de Sales, Your creature, there is so much gentleness!'" For his part, Francis held Vincent de Paul in such high regard that he asked him to be the Superior of the Visitation convent that was founded in Paris in 1619. Afterwards, he returned to Annecy, where his brother, Jean-François, was given to him as a coadjutor bishop, for Francis' health was spent. He suffered from arteriosclerosis and dropsy, among other ills.

In October 1622, Bishop de Sales accompanied the Duke of Savoy, who was going to meet King Louis XIII in Avignon. Sensing his impending death, the bishop made his will and said farewell to his relatives. On his journey, he made a stop in Lyons, where he met for the last time with Mother de Chantal. On December 27th, he visited the novitiate, where the Sisters asked him to write them some spiritual lessons. On a sheet of paper, he wrote on the top, in the middle and on the bottom: "humility". Early in the afternoon of that same day, he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. He died on December 28th.

On November 16, 1877, Pope Pius IX proclaimed Saint Francis de Sales a Doctor of the Church, and declared that because of him, true piety "gained entrance to the thrones of kings, the tents of generals, the courts of judges, custom houses, workshops, and even the huts of herdsmen" (*Encyclical Dives in Misericordia*). More recently, Pope Benedict XVI underscored, "Thus came into being the appeal to lay people and the care for the consecration of temporal things and for the sanctification of daily life on which the Second Vatican Council and the spirituality of our time were to insist. The ideal of a reconciled humanity was expressed in the harmony between prayer and action in the world, between the search for perfection and the secular condition" (March 2, 2011).

We can join in the wish expressed by Blessed John Paul II, that "the teaching of the holy Bishop of Geneva ... [remain] a source of light for our contemporaries, as he was in his time."

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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