

St Francis de Sales. Mary's presence (8/8)

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THE PRESENCE OF MARY IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (8/8)

The first information we have about devotion to Mary in the de Sales family refers to his mother, the young Françoise de Sionnaz, a devotee of the Virgin, faithful to the Rosary. She passed love for this pious practice on to her son, who, as a young boy in Annecy, enrolled in the Confraternity of the Rosary, committing himself to say all or part of it every day. Fidelity to this would accompany him throughout his life.

Devotion to the Virgin continued during his Parisian years. "He entered the Congregation of Mary, which brought together the spiritual elite of the students at their college."

Then there was the **spiritual crisis** that broke out at the end of 1586: for several weeks he did not eat, sleep, and was in despair. He had the idea in his head that he had been abandoned by God's love and would "never be able to see your sweet face again". Until one day, in January 1587, on his return from college, he entered the church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès and made an act of abandonment before the Virgin: he said the Salve Regina and was freed from temptation and regained his serenity.

His prayer and devotion to the Mother of God certainly continued during his years in Padua: he would entrust his vocation to the priesthood to her, and on 18 December 1593, he was ordained a priest and would certainly have celebrated a few masses in the church at Annecy, dedicated to Notre Dame de Liesse (Our Lady of Joy), to thank Her for taking him and leading him by the hand during those long years of study.

Years passed and August 1603 came, when Francis received the letter of invitation from the Archbishop of Bourges to preach for the upcoming Lent in Dijon.

"Our Congregation is the fruit of the journey to Dijon," he wrote to his friend Fr Pollien.

It would be during this Lent, which began on 5 March 1604, that Francis would meet Baroness Jane Frances Frémyot de Chantal. He would begin a journey towards God in search of His will, a journey that would last six years and end on 6 June 1610, the day on which the Visitation was born with Jane Frances and two other women entering the novitiate.

"Our little Congregation is truly a work of the Heart of Jesus and Mary," and after a short time he confidently added: "God takes care of his servants and Our Lady provides them with what they need."

His Daughters would be called Religious of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Four hundred years after its foundation, the Monastery of the Visitation in Paris writes that the Order has never ceased to draw all the best of its spirituality from this Gospel scene.

"Contemplation and praise of the Lord, united to the service of one's neighbour; the spirit of thanksgiving and the humility of the Magnificat; real poverty that throws itself with infinite confidence on the goodness of the Father; availability to the Spirit; missionary ardour to reveal the presence of Christ; joy in the Lord; Mary who faithfully keeps all these things in her heart."

Jane Frances de Chantal summarises the Salesian spirit as follows: "a spirit of profound humility towards God and of great gentleness towards one's neighbour", which are precisely the virtues that immediately arise from the lived contemplation of the mystery of the Visitation.

In the Treatise on the spirit of simplicity, Francis told his Visitandines:

"We must have a totally simple trust which makes us remain quiet in the arms of our Father and our dear Mother, confident that Our Lord and Our Lady, our dear Mother, will always protect us with their care and motherly tenderness."

The Visitation is the living monument of Francis' love for the Mother of Jesus.

His friend Bishop J.P. Camus sums up Francis' love for the Virgin in this way: "His devotion to the Mother of splendid love, of wisdom, of chaste love and of holy hope was truly great. From his earliest years he devoted himself to honouring her."

Mary's presence is like yeast in the dough for his letters: discreet, silent, active and effective. There is no lack of prayers composed by Francis himself.

On 8 December (!) 1621, he sent one to a Visitandine:

"May the most glorious Virgin fill us with her love, so that together, you and I, who have had the good fortune to be called and have embarked under her protection and in her name, may accomplish our voyage in humble purity and simplicity, so that one day we may find ourselves in the port of salvation, which is Paradise."

When he wrote letters around some Marian feast, he did not miss an opportunity to mention her or make a point for reflection. Thus,

– for the Assumption of Mary into heaven: "May this holy Virgin, with her prayers, have us live in this holy love! May this love always be the sole object of our heart.

– for the Annunciation: it is the day "of the most blessed greeting ever given to anyone. I beseech this glorious Virgin to grant you some of the consolation she received."

Who was Mary for Francis?

a. She was the Mother of God

Not only Mother, but also... grandmother!

"Honour, reverence and respect the holy and glorious Virgin Mary with a special love: she is the Mother of our sovereign Father and therefore also our dear grandmother. Let us have recourse to her as grandchildren, let us throw ourselves upon her knees with absolute trust; at all times, in all circumstances, let us appeal to this sweet Mother, let us invoke her maternal love and, making every effort to imitate her virtues, let us have the sincere heart of children for her."

She leads us to Jesus: "Do whatever He tells you!"

"If we want Our Lady to ask her Son to change the water of our lukewarmness into the wine of His love, we must do all that He will tell us. Let us do what the Saviour will tell us well, let us fill our hearts well with the water of penance, and this lukewarm water will be changed for us into the wine of fervent love."

b. She was the model we must imitate

In listening to the Word of God.

"Receive it in your heart like a precious ointment, following the example of the Blessed Virgin, who carefully kept all the praises spoken in honour of her Son in her own,"

Model for living in humility.

"The Most Blessed Virgin, Our Lady, gave us a most remarkable example of humility when she pronounced these words: Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word; in saying that she is the handmaid of the Lord, she expresses the greatest act of humility that can be done and immediately performs an act of most excellent generosity, saying: Let it be done to me according to your word."

Model for living *common* holiness.

"If one wants to be a saint of true holiness, it must be common, daily, everyday holiness like that of Our Lord and Our Lady."

Model for living in serenity:

"If you feel excessively worried, soothe your soul and try to give it back its tranquillity. Imagine how the Virgin worked calmly with one hand, while with the other she held Our Lord, during her childhood: she held Him on one arm, never taking her gaze away from Him."

Model for giving ourselves to God in time:

"Oh how happy are the souls who, in imitation of this holy Virgin, consecrate themselves as first fruits, from their youth, to the service of Our Lord."

c. Strength in suffering

Madame de Granieu's husband suffered very painful attacks of gout.

Francis shared in the gentleman's suffering sayings:

"A pain that our Blessed Lady and Abbess (the Virgin Mary) can greatly alleviate by leading you to Mount Calvary, where she holds the novitiate of her monastery, teaching you not only to suffer well, but to suffer everything that happens both for us and for our loved ones with love."

Let me conclude with this beautiful passage that underlines the bond that unites Mary and the believer every time we approach the Eucharist:

"Do you want to become relatives of the Virgin Mary? Go to communion! For in receiving the Holy Sacrament you receive the flesh of her flesh and the blood of her blood, since the precious body of the Saviour, which is in the divine Eucharist, was made and formed with her most pure blood and with the collaboration of the Holy Spirit. Since you cannot be related to Our Lady in the same way as Elizabeth, be so by imitating her virtues and holy life."

St Francis de Sales. Gentleness (7/8)

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GENTLENESS IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (7/8)

Some episodes from Francis's life leads us to contemplate "Salesian gentleness".

In order to improve the situation of the clergy in the parishes, Francis had decided that at least three candidates for a parish would be named. The best would be chosen.

Now, it had happened that a Knight of Malta, furious because one of his servants had been excluded from the selection (this candidate knew more about courting women than commenting on the Gospel!) had abruptly entered the bishop's study and had insulted and threatened him, and Francis had remained standing, hat in hand. The bishop's brother then asked him if anger had ever taken hold of him at any time and the holy man did not hide from him that "then and often anger boiled in his brain like water boiling in a pot on the fire; but that by the grace of God, even if he had to die for having violently resisted this passion, he would never have said a word favour of it."

The first monastery was being built in the city (the *Sainte Source*) and work was not progressing because the Dominicans were protesting with the workers. According to them, there was not the required distance between the two buildings. The protests were lively and the bishop kindly and patiently rushed in to calm tempers. This calmness and gentleness did not please Jane de Chantal, who blurted:

"Your gentleness will only increase the insolence of these

malicious people.” “Not so, not so” Francis replied, “so, Mother, do you want me to destroy the inner peace I have been working on for more than eighteen years in just a quarter of an hour?”

There is an important premise for understanding what Salesian gentleness is. An expert, Salesian Fr Pietro Braido, tells us about it:

“It is not sentimentalism, which evokes mushy kinds of expressions; it is not the kindness that is typical of people who are happy to close their eyes to reality so as not to have problems and annoyances; it is not the short-sightedness of people who see everything beautiful and good and for whom everything is always fine; it is not the inert attitude of people who have no suggestions to offer... Salesian gentleness (Don Bosco would use the term loving-kindness) is something else: it undoubtedly stems from a deep and solid charity and demands careful control of one’s emotional and affective resources; it expresses itself in constant, serene humour, sign of someone with a rich humanity; it requires a capacity for empathy and dialogue and creates a serene atmosphere, free of tension and conflict. So Francis’ gentleness is not to be confused with weakness; on the contrary, it is strength that requires control, goodness of mind, clarity of purpose and a strong presence of God.”

But Francis was not born this way! Endowed with marked sensitivity, he was easy given to mood swings and outbursts of anger.

Lajeunie writes:

“Francis de Sales was a true Savoyard, habitually calm and gentle, but capable of terrible rages; a volcano beneath the snow. By nature he was very quick to anger, but committed himself daily to correction.

Given his lively and sanguine temperament, his habitual gentleness was often put to the test. He was much hurt by insolent and unpleasant words and vulgar gestures. In 1619 in

Paris, he confessed that he still had outbursts of anger in his heart and had to rein it in with both hands! 'I made a pact with my tongue not to say a word when I was in a rage. By the grace of God I was able to have the strength to curb the passion of anger, to which I was naturally inclined.' It was by the grace of God that he had acquired the ability to master the angry passions to which his temper was prone. His gentleness was thus a strength, the fruit of a victory."

It is not difficult to discover the saint's personal experience in the following quotations, made up of patience, self-control, inner struggle ...

He said to one woman:

"Be very gentle and affable in the midst of the occupations you have, because everyone expects this good example from you. It is easy to steer the boat when it is not hindered by the winds; but in the midst of troubles, problems, it is difficult to remain serene, just as it is difficult to steer a course in the midst of gales."

To Madame de Valbonne, whom Francis described as "a pearl", he wrote:

"We must always remain steadfast in the practice of our two dear virtues: gentleness towards our neighbour and loving humility towards God."

We find the two virtues dear to the Heart of Jesus together: gentleness and humility.

It is necessary to practise gentleness **to self as well**.

"Whenever you find your heart without gentleness, content yourself with taking it very gently in your fingertips to put it back in its place, and do not take it with closed fists or too abruptly. We must be willing to serve this heart in its illnesses and also to use some kindness in its regard; and we must bind our passions and inclinations with chains of gold, that is, with the chains of love.

"He who can maintain meekness amid pain and weariness, and peace amid worry and over-whelming cares, is well nigh

perfect. Perfect evenness of temper, true gentleness and sweetness of heart, are more rare than perfect chastity, but they are so much the more to be cultivated. I commend them to you, my dearest daughter, because upon these, like the oil of a lamp, depends the flame of good example. Nothing is so edifying as a loving good temper.”

Francis reminded parents, educators, teachers, superiors in general to practise gentleness especially when it comes to making some **remark or reproaching** someone. Here the Salesian spirit emerges:

“Even when reprimanding them, as is necessary, one must use much love and gentleness with them. In this way, reprimands easily obtain some good results.

Correction dictated by passion, even when it has a reasonable basis, is much less effective than that which comes solely from reason.”

“I assure you that every time I have resorted to sharp retorts, I have had to regret them. People do much more out of love and charity than out of severity and rigour.”

Gentleness goes hand in hand with another virtue: **patience**. Here, then, are a few letters recommending it:

“As long as we remain down here [on earth], we must resign ourselves to putting up with ourselves until God takes us to heaven. We must therefore be patient and never think that we can correct in a day the bad habits we have contracted because of the meagre care we have taken of our spiritual health [...]. We must, let us admit it, be patient with everyone, but first of all with ourselves.”

To Madame de Limonjon he wrote: “It is not possible to get to where you aspire to in one day: we must gain a point today, tomorrow another; and so, step by step, we will arrive at being masters of ourselves; and it will be no small victory.”

Patience, for Francis, is the first virtue to be put in place in building a solid spiritual edifice.

“The effect of patience is to possess one’s soul well, and

patience is all the more perfect the more it is free from restlessness and haste."

"Have patience with regard to your inner cross: the Saviour allows it so that, one day, you may better know who you are. Do you not see that the restlessness of the day is calmed by the rest of the night? This means that our soul needs nothing more than to abandon itself completely to God and be willing to serve Him amidst roses as well as thorns."

Here are two practical letters: to Madame de la Fléchère he wrote:

'What do you want me to say about the return of your miseries, except that you must take up arms and courage again and fight more decisively than ever? You will have to use a lot of patience and resignation to get your affairs in order. God will bless your work."

And to Madame de Travernay he said:

"You must know how to accept the annoyances that touch you in the course of the day with patience and gentleness, and for the love of Him who permits them. Therefore lift up your heart often to God, implore his help, and consider the good fortune you have to be his as the main foundation of your consolation!"

Finally, this text I call **the hymn to charity according to St Francis de Sales**.

"He who is gentle offends no one, bears willingly those who do him harm, suffers with patience the blows he receives, and does no evil for evil. He who is gentle never becomes upset, but conforms all his words to humility, overcoming evil with good. Always make corrections from the heart and with gentle words.

In this way corrections will produce better effects. Never resort to retaliation against those who have displeased you. Never resent or be angry for any reason, for that is always an imperfection."

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St Francis de Sales. The Eucharist (6/8)

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THE EUCHARIST IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (6/8)

Francis received his First Communion and Confirmation at the age of about nine. From then on he received Communion every week or at least once a month.

God took possession of his heart and Francis would remain faithful to this friendship that would gradually become the love of his life.

His fidelity to Christian life continued and was strengthened during the ten years in Paris. "He received communion at least once a month, if he could not do so more often." And this for ten years!

Regarding his time in Padua we know that he went to Mass every day and that he received communion once a week. The Eucharist united with prayer became the nourishment of his Christian life and vocation. It is in this profound unity with the Lord that he perceived His will: it is here that the desire to be "all of God" matured.

Francis was ordained a priest on 18 December 1593 and the Eucharist would be at the heart of his days, and his strength for spending himself for others.

Here are some testimonies taken from the Beatification Process:

“It was easy to notice how he kept himself in deep recollection and attention before God: his eyes modestly lowered, his face recollected with a sweetness and serenity so great that those who observed him carefully were struck and moved by it.”

“When he celebrated Holy Mass he was completely different from how he usually was: a serene face, without distraction and, at the moment of communion, those who saw him were deeply impressed by his devotion.”

St Vincent de Paul adds:

“When I repeated his words to myself, I felt such an admiration for him that I was led to see in him the man who best reproduced the Son of God living on earth.”

We already know of his departure in 1594 as a missionary to the Chablais.

He spent his first months in the shelter of the Allinges fortress. Visiting what remains of this fortress, one is impressed by the chapel which has remained intact: small, dark, cold, made of stone. Here Francis celebrated the Eucharist every morning at around four o'clock and paused in prayer before going down to Thonon with a heart full of charity and mercy, drawn from the divine sacrament.

Francis treated people with respect, indeed with compassion, and “Some wished to make themselves feared; but he desired only to be loved, and to enter men's hearts through the doorway of affection” (J.P. Camus).

It is the Eucharist that sustained his initial struggles: he did not respond to insults, provocations, lynching; he related to everyone with warmth.

His first sermon as a sub-deacon had been on the subject of the Eucharist and it would certainly serve him well in the

Chablais, because "this august sacrament" would be his warhorse: in the sermons he gave in the church of St Hippolytus, he would often address this subject and expound the Catholic point of view with clarity and passion.

The following testimony, addressed to his friend A. Favre, tells of the quality and ardour of his preaching on such an important subject:

"Yesterday M. d'Avully and the elders of the city, as they are called, came openly to my preaching, because they had heard that I was to speak about the august sacrament of the altar. They had such a desire to hear from me the exposition of what Catholics believe and their proofs concerning this mystery that, not having dared to come publicly, for fear of seeming to be ignoring the law they had imposed on themselves, they listened to me from a place where they could not be seen."

Little by little, the Body of the Lord infused his pastor's heart with gentleness, meekness, goodness, so that even his preacher's voice was affected: a calm and benevolent tone, never aggressive or polemical!

"I am convinced that he who preaches with love, preaches sufficiently against heretics, even if he does not say a single word or argue with them."

More eloquent than any treatise is this experience that took place on 25 May 1595.

At three in the morning, while engrossed in deep meditation on the most holy and august sacrament of the Eucharist, he felt moved to rapture by the Holy Spirit in an abundance of sweetness... and since his heart was overwhelmed by such delight, he was finally forced to throw himself to the ground and exclaim: "Lord, hold back the waves of your grace; withdraw them from me because I can no longer bear the greatness of your sweetness, which forces me to prostrate myself."

In 1596, after more than two years of catechesis, he decided to celebrate the three Christmas Masses. They were celebrated

amidst general enthusiasm and emotion. Francis was happy! This midnight Mass on Christmas 1596 was one of the high points of his life. In this Mass was the Church, the Catholic Church re-established in its living foundation.

The Council of Trent had advocated the practice of the **Forty Hour Devotion**, which consisted of the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament for three consecutive days by the entire Christian community.

At the beginning of September 1597, they took place in Annemasse, on the outskirts of Geneva, in the presence of the bishop, Francis and other collaborators, with **much greater fruit than hoped for**. They were intense days of prayer, processions, sermons, masses. Over forty parishes participated with an incredible number of people.

Given this success, the following year they were held in Thonon. It was a feast lasting several days that exceeded all expectations. Everything ended late at night, with the last sermon given by Francis. He preached on the Eucharist.

Many scholars of the life and works of the saint maintain that only his great love for the Eucharist can explain the 'miracle' of the Chablais, that is, how this young priest was able to bring the entire vast region back to the Church in just four years.

And this love lasted all his life, until the end. In the last meeting he had in Lyons with his Daughters, the Visitandines, by then near to death, he spoke to them about confession and communion.

What was the Eucharist for our saint? It was first and foremost:

The heart of his day, which meant he lived in intimate communion with God

"I have not yet told you about the sun of the spiritual exercises: the most holy and supreme Sacrifice and Sacrament

of the Mass, the centre of the Christian religion, the heart of devotion, the soul of piety.”

It was the confident handing over of his life to God whom he asks for strength to continue his mission with humility and charity.

“If the world asks you why you receive communion so often, answer that it is to learn to love God, to purify you from your imperfections, to free you from your miseries, to find strength in your weaknesses and consolation in your afflictions. Two kinds of people must receive communion often: the perfect, because being well-disposed they would do wrong not to approach the fountain and source of perfection; and the imperfect in order to strive for perfection. The strong not to weaken and the weak to strengthen themselves. The sick to seek healing and the healthy not to become sick.”

The Eucharist creates a profound unity in Francis with so many people

“This sacrament not only unites us to Jesus Christ, but also to our neighbour, with those who partake of the same food and makes us one with them. And one of the main fruits is mutual charity and gentleness of heart towards one another since we belong to the same Lord and in Him we are united heart to heart with one another.”

It is a gradual transformation in Jesus

“Those who have good bodily digestion feel a strengthening for the whole body, because of the general distribution that is made of the food. So, My daughter, those who have good spiritual digestion feel that Jesus Christ, who is their food, spreads and communicates to all parts of their soul and body. They have Jesus Christ in their brain, in their heart, in their chest, in their eyes, in their hands, in their ears, in their feet. But what does this Saviour do everywhere? He straightens everything, purifies everything, mortifies everything, enlivens everything. He loves in the heart, understands in the brain, breathes in the chest, sees in the

eyes, speaks in the tongue, and so on: he does everything in everyone and then we live, not we, but it is Jesus Christ who lives in us.

It also transforms the days and nights, so that 'Nights are days when God is in our hearts and days become nights when He is not.'"

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St Francis de Sales. Following and seeking God's will (5/8)

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FOLLOWING AND SEEKING GOD'S WILL, IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (5/8)

This is the most popular theme in the writings of St Francis de Sales, the theme he returns to most often.

The discovery of God as a Provident Father and love for his will go hand in hand in Francis' life: he reminds us that "every day we ask him: Thy will be done, but when we actually have to do it, how difficult it is! We offer ourselves to God so often and say to Him each time: 'I am yours; here is my heart!' But, when He wants to make use of us, we are so neglectful! How can we say that we are His, if we do not want to conform to His holy will?"

“God’s will must become the only thing to be sought and willed, never departing from it for any reason! Walk under the guidance of God’s Providence, thinking only of the present day and leaving to Our Lord the heart you have given Him, never wanting to take it back for anything.”

Francis de Sales teaches that following God’s will is the best way to become a saint and this way is open to everyone. He writes:

“I intend to offer my teachings to those who live in the cities, in the family, at court, and who, by virtue of their status, are forced by social conveniences to live among others... A different exercise of devotion is required of each – the noble, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the maiden and the wife; and furthermore such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual.”

What Francis of Sales calls devotion, Pope Francis calls holiness and writes words that seem to come straight from the pen of Francis of Sales:

“To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious. We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves.”

In a letter, Francis de Sales wrote:

“For the love of God, abandon yourself entirely to His will and do not believe that you can serve Him in any other way, because we never serve Him well except when we serve Him as He wishes.”

This requires

“that we should not sow in our neighbour’s field, however beautiful it may be, until our own has been fully sown. Distraction of the heart which leads to having the heart in

one place and duty in another is always very harmful.”

From time to time I hear this question asked:

“How do I understand what God’s will for me is?”

I found an answer in the life of the saint.

For more than six years Jane de Chantal waited before she could consecrate herself entirely to the Lord and found with Francis what would become the Order of the Visitation. Throughout this period, the Saint sought to understand what God’s will was in this regard. He himself tells us about it in a letter to Jane Frances:

“That great movement of spirit that led you as if by force and with great consolation; the long reflection that I imposed on myself before giving you my assent; the fact that neither you nor I trusted only in ourselves; the fact that we gave the first stirrings of your conscience all the time to calm down; the prayers, not of a day or two, but of several months, that preceded your choice, are infallible signs that allow us to affirm without a shadow of doubt that such was the will of God.”

This is a valuable testimony that highlights Francis’ prudence. He knew how to wait calmly, without renouncing all the means at his disposal to decipher God’s will for him and the Baroness. These also apply to us today: reflect long before the Lord, seek advice from wise people, do not make hasty decisions, pray a lot.

He gives Jane Frances her motivation:

“As long as God wants you to remain in the world out of love for Him, stay there willingly and joyfully. Many leave the world without leaving themselves and in this way seek what they like, their peace of mind and their satisfaction. We leave the world to serve God, to follow God and to love God. Since we aspire to nothing but his holy service, wherever we serve him we will always find ourselves content.”

Once God’s will is understood clearly enough, obedience is

required, that is, putting it into practice, living it!
He wrote in capital letters to the Baroness de Chantal: words that would be his entire life's programme and, I would say, sum up Francis' spirituality:

DO EVERYTHING OUT OF LOVE AND NOTHING OUT OF FEAR; LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN FEARING DISOBEDIENCE

To obey is to speak lovingly to God who calls me to live his will in the concrete circumstances of my life.

Obedience is the form that love takes

Here are the consequences of this surrender to God's will that Francis reminds so many people of with splendid images. To Madame Brûlart, a mother of a family, he writes:

"Everything we do receives its value from our conformity to God's will. We must love what God loves. Now he loves our vocation. So let us also love it and not waste time thinking about the vocation of others."

Progress is to be stressed and encouraged:

"You have said a wonderful word to me: let God place me where he wants; I don't care, as long as I can serve him. We must love this will of God and the obligation it presupposes in us, even if it is keeping pigs or doing the humblest acts throughout our lives, because, wherever the good God places us, we must not care. This is the goal of perfection."

And now some images: the garden.

"Do not sow your desires in someone else's garden, but just look after your own properly. Do not wish to be anything but what you are, and try to be that perfectly. This is the great secret and the least understood secret of the spiritual life. What is the use of building castles in Spain if we have to live in France? This is an old lesson of mine, and you understand it well."

The image of the boat.

"It seems to us that by changing boat we will be better off. Yes, we will be better off if we change ourselves! I am the sworn enemy of all those useless, dangerous and evil desires. For although **what** we desire is good, our desiring is bad, for God is not asking us for that thing, but for something else which he wants us to apply ourselves to."

The image of the child.

We need to entrust "our general purpose to divine Providence, abandoning ourselves in his arms, like the little child, who eats what his father gives him every day in order to grow, certain that he will always provide him with food in proportion to his appetite and needs."

Francis insists on this point, which is fundamental:

"What does it matter to a soul that is truly in love, whether the heavenly Bridegroom is served in one way or another? He who seeks only the satisfaction of his Beloved is happy with whatever makes him happy!"

The following excerpt, written following one of Jane de Chantal's serious illnesses, is a moving one:

"You are more precious to me than myself; but this does not prevent me from conforming fully to the divine will. We intend to serve God in this world with our whole being: whether he consider it better that we are one in this world and one in the other or both in the other, may his most holy will be done."

To conclude, a few more lines from his letters:

"We want to serve God, but by following our will and not his. God declared that He does not like any sacrifice contrary to obedience. God commands me to serve souls and I want to remain in contemplation: the contemplative life is good, but not when it is in opposition to obedience. We cannot choose our duties ourselves: we must see what God wants; and if God wants me to serve him by doing one thing, I must not want to serve him by doing another."

“If we are holy according to our own will, we will never be holy properly: we must be holy according to God’s will!”

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St Francis de Sales. Trust in God Providence (4/8)

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TRUST IN GOD PROVIDENCE, IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (4/8)

Let us enter the heart of Francis de Sales to grasp all its beauty and richness.

“Our faith in God depends on the image we have of God!” where faith means our relationship with Him.

Francis presents us with the God in whom he believes in his writings. He gives us his image of God, a God discovered as a Father who provides for and loves his children, and consequently the relationship Francis has with him is one of total and unlimited trust.

Let us enjoy these passages from his letters, in which he portrays the face of the Father who is Providence and cares for us.

“My beloved daughter, how much the Lord thinks of you and with how much love He looks upon you! Yes, He is thinking of you

and not only of you, but even of the last hair on your head: it is a truth of faith that you absolutely must not doubt."

"Let us serve God well and never say: What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Where will our sisters come from? It is up to the Master of the house to worry about these. It is up to the Mistress of our house to furnish it; and our houses belong to God and his holy Mother."

In the Gospel Jesus invites us to translate this trust into living the present moment well, and Francis reiterates this in the following letter:

"Try to do well today, without thinking of tomorrow; tomorrow, then, try to do the same; and do not think about what you will do throughout the duration of your tenure, but carry out your duty day by day without giving thought to the future, because your heavenly Father, who looks after guiding you today, will also guide you tomorrow and after tomorrow, in proportion to the trust which, despite your weakness, you place in his Providence."

"He has looked after you until today. Hold tightly to the hand of His Providence and He will assist you in all circumstances and, where you cannot walk, He will carry you. Think not what will happen to you tomorrow, for the same Father, who cares for you today will care for you tomorrow and always. What can a son fear in the arms of so great a father?"



And how is Francis' heart directed in this regard? In this excerpt from a letter we can contemplate his heart, which is like a chick under the protection of Providence:

"May God to whom I belong dispose of me according to his good pleasure: it matters little where I should end this miserable remainder of my mortal days, as long as I can end them in his grace. Let us gently hide our littleness in that greatness

and, like a chick under its mother's wings lives safe and warm, let us rest our hearts under the sweet and loving Providence of Our Lord."

If Francis has this relationship of trust with God, he can offer good advice to the recipients of his letters, strengthened by his experience. Let us listen to some of them. "Let us be faithful, humble, gently and lovingly resolved to continue on the path on which heavenly Providence has placed us."

Mother Favre in Lyon felts the weight of her office, which was not to her liking. The secret to overcoming this state of mind?

"Cast your thoughts resolutely on the shoulders of our Lord and Saviour and He will carry you and strengthen you. Keep your eyes fixed on God's will and His providence."

Our trust in God, our conviction that we are in good hands is sometimes put to the test, especially when pain, illness, death knock on the door of our lives or those of people dear to us. Francis knows this and does not back down or become discouraged.

"Trusting in God in the sweetness and peace of prosperity is something almost everyone knows how to do; but abandoning oneself entirely to him amidst hurricanes and storms is characteristic of his children."

"Small events offer occasions for the most humble mortifications and the best acts of abandonment in God. In the most painful events, one must profoundly adore divine Providence. One must die or love. I would like my heart to be torn out or, if it remains in me, to be left for this love alone."

How many people pray to obtain this or some other grace from the Lord and, when it does not come or is late in coming, they become discouraged and their trust in Him falters. We have

this splendid advice written to a woman in Paris, a few months before the saint's death:

"God has hidden the time when he intends to satisfy you and the manner in which he will satisfy you in the secret of his Providence; and perhaps, he will satisfy you in an excellent manner not by satisfying you according to your designs, but according to his own."

Francis revealed his plans to Jane Frances on Pentecost Sunday, 1607: to found a new institute with her and through her. Following this meeting came a letter indicating the spirit for continuing this journey, which would last another four years!

"Keep your heart wide open and let it rest often in the arms of divine Providence. Courage, courage! Jesus is ours: may our hearts always be his."

In the space of a few years, several bereavements were experienced by both Francis' and Jane's families.

Francis' youngest sister Jeanne died suddenly. Here is how saints experience such events:

"My dear daughter, in the midst of my heart of flesh, which feels so much sorrow at this death, I feel very sensibly a certain suavity, a tranquillity and a sweet repose of my spirit in divine Providence, which infuses my soul with a great joy even in sorrows."

At the beginning of 1610 there were two new bereavements: the sudden death of Charlotte, the baroness's youngest daughter, aged about ten, and the death of Francis' mother, Madame de Boisy.

"Must we not therefore, dearest Daughter, adore in all things the supreme Providence whose counsels are holy, good and most loving? Let us confess, my beloved Daughter, let us confess that God is good and that his mercy endures for eternity. I felt great sorrow at this separation, but I must also say that it was a peaceful sorrow, though a living one. I wept without

spiritual bitterness.”

And in illness?

After overcoming a very serious health crisis, Francis wrote this valuable testimony of how he experienced the illness:

“I am neither cured nor ill; but I think I will recover completely very soon. My dearest daughter, we must leave our life and all that we are to the pure disposition of divine Providence, because, in the end, we do not belong to ourselves, but to Him who, in order to make us His own, wanted to be all ours in such a loving way.”

The best conclusion to this round-up of messages that Francis offers us through his letters seems to me to be the one that the Saint wrote in the *Introduction*. It is a masterpiece of freshness and joy.

“In all your affairs lean solely on God’s Providence, by means of which alone your plans can succeed ...

“Imitate a little child, whom one sees holding tight with one hand to its father, while with the other it gathers strawberries or blackberries from the wayside hedge. Even so, while you gather and use this world’s goods with one hand, always let the other be fast in your Heavenly Father’s Hand, and look round from time to time to make sure that He is satisfied with what you are doing, at home or abroad.

“Beware of letting go, under the idea of making or receiving more—if He forsakes you, you will fall to the ground at the first step. When your ordinary work or business is not specially engrossing, let your heart be fixed more on God than on it; and if the work be such as to require your undivided attention, then pause from time to time and look to God, even as navigators who make for the haven they would attain, by looking up at the heavens rather than down upon the deeps on which they sail. So doing, God will work with you, in you, and for you, and your work will be blessed.”

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Francis de Sales. The *Da mihi animas* (3/8)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

THE “DA MIHI ANIMAS” OF SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES (3/8)

First of all, we need to clarify what is meant by pastoral zeal:

“Zeal does not only mean commitment, being busy: it expresses an all-encompassing orientation, the anxiety and almost the torment of bringing every person to salvation, at all costs, by all means, through a tireless search for the least and most pastorally abandoned.”

Often, when one hears talk of pastoral zeal, figures come to mind who are characterised by great activity, generous in spending themselves for others, moved by such charity that sometimes they do not even have “time to eat”. Francis was one of these, completely devoted to the good of souls in his diocese and beyond. However, through his example he gives us a further message: his way of living the *da mihi animas* springs from the care he took of his interior life, his prayer, his unreserved surrender to God.

Therefore, these are the two sides of his zeal that we want to draw out from his life and writings.

The Council of Trent had just ended when Francis was born. On the pastoral level, it called the bishops to a more attentive and generous care of their dioceses. This care came first of all from being resident in the diocese, being among the people, instructing the clergy by establishing seminaries, frequent visits to parishes, training parish priests, spreading the Catechism as an instrument of evangelisation for the youngest and not only the youngest ...; a whole series of measures to make bishops and priests aware of their identity as pastors in the care of souls.

Francis took these reminders seriously to the point of becoming, together with St Charles Borromeo, the model of the **pastor bishop**, totally dedicated to his people, as he himself said, recalling his episcopal consecration:

“On that day God took me from myself to take me for himself and thus give me to the people, meaning that he had transformed me from what I was for me into what I should be for them.”

Francis, a priest for nine years and bishop for twenty, lived under the banner of this total self-gift to God and his brothers and sisters. At the end of 1593, a few days after his ordination to the priesthood, he delivered a famous address, known as a harangue for its content and the vigour with which it was delivered.

The following year, he offered himself as a “missionary” in the Chablais and set off armed with a strong rope: “Prayer, almsgiving and fasting are the three parts that make up the rope that the enemy breaks with difficulty. With divine grace, we will try to bind this enemy with it.”

He preached in the church of St Hippolytus, Thonon, after the Protestant service.

His apostolate in the Chablais at the beginning was one of contact with the people: he smiled, spoke to them, greeted them, stopped and inquired... convinced that the walls of

mistrust can only be broken down with relationships of friendship and empathy. If he could make himself loved, everything would be easier and simpler.

"I am dead tired," he wrote to his bishop, but he did not give up.

He loved to pray **the Rosary** every day, even late at night, and when he feared falling asleep from tiredness he said it standing or walking.

Francis' missionary experience in the Chablais was finally interrupted towards the end of 1601 to go to Paris, where he had to deal with the problems of the diocese and remained there for nine long months.

Due to political commitments and friendship with many people he frequented the court and it was there that Francis discovered many men and women eager to walk towards the Lord. It was here that the idea of a text was born that would summarise the principles of the interior life in a concise and practical form and facilitate its application to all social classes. And so from this year the Saint began to put together the first materials that would later contribute to the composition of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

On his return from Paris he learned the news of the death of his dear bishop. He prepared for his episcopal consecration with two weeks of silence and prayer.

He immediately felt the weight of the new task:

"You cannot believe how much I feel beset and burdened by this great and difficult office."

In summary, Francis' zeal in the 20 years he would spend as bishop was manifested above all in these areas:

He visited parishes and monasteries to get to know his diocese: he gradually discovered its flaws and limitations, including serious ones, as well as the beauty, generosity and good heart of so many people. To visit the parishes mean he

was absent from Annecy for a long time: "I will leave here in ten days and continue my pastoral visit for five whole months in the high mountains, where the people await me with great affection." "every evening when I retire, I cannot move either body or mind so tired am I all over; and by morning I am more cheerful than ever."

Above all, he listened to his priests and encouraged them to live their vocation faithfully.

The apostolate of the pen: Francis' *Opera Omnia* consists of 27 powerful volumes... One wonders how a man could write so much. How much effort, how much time stolen from sleep, from rest! All the pages that came from his pen are the consequence of his passion for souls, of his great desire to bring the Lord to everyone he met, no one excluded.

The foundation of the Order of the Visitation

A new reality was born in 1610: three women (Baroness de Chantal, Jacqueline Favre and Charlotte de Brécard) gave life to a new form of religious life made up exclusively of prayer and charity. They were inspired by the Gospel picture of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary to her cousin Elizabeth.

The other aspect of his zeal was **the care he gave to his spiritual life.**

Cardinal Charles Borromeo wrote in a letter to the clergy: "Do you look after souls? Do not neglect self-care because this and do not give yourself to others to the point where there is nothing left of you for yourself."

He returned home exhausted and in need of "readjusting my poor spirit. I propose doing a complete overhaul of myself and putting all the pieces of my heart back in place."

"On my return from the visit, when I wanted to take a good look at my soul, I felt sorry for it: I found it so thin and shattered that it looked like death. No wonder! For four or five months it had hardly had a moment to breathe. I will stay close to it for the coming winter and try to treat it well."



S. Francis de Sales and St Francisca de Chantal. Stained-glass window, Church of St. Maurice de Thorens, France

In the *Introduction* he wrote:

“There is no clock, however good, but must be continually wound up; and moreover, during the course of each year it will need taking to pieces, to cleanse away the rust which clogs it, to straighten bent works, and renew such as are worn.

Even so, any one who really cares for his heart’s devotion will wind it up to God night and morning, and examine into its condition, correcting and improving it; and at least once a year he will take the works to pieces and examine them carefully; – I mean his affections and passions, – so as to repair whatever may be amiss.”

Lent was about to begin and he wrote this meaningful note to a friend:

“I am going to dedicate this Lent to observing the obligation of residence in my cathedral and to tidying up my soul a little, which is cracked from the great strains to which it has been subjected. It is like a broken clock: one has to take it apart, piece by piece, and, after having cleaned and oiled it well, put it back together again so that it strikes the right time.”

Francis’ activity went hand in hand with care for his inner life; this is a great message for us today, to avoid becoming dry and therefore useless branches!

To conclude:

“I have sacrificed my life and my soul to God and his Church: what does it matter if I have to inconvenience myself when it is a matter of procuring some benefit for the salvation of souls?”

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St. Francis de Sales. Friendship (2/8)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

ST. FRANCIS DE SALES AND FRIENDSHIP (2/8)

Having met Francis de Sales through the story of his life, let us look at the beauty of his heart and present some of his virtues with the aim of awakening the desire in many people to explore the rich personality of this saint.

The first snapshot, the one that immediately fascinates those who approach Francis de Sales, is friendship! It is the calling card with which he presents himself.

There is an episode when Francis was in his twenties that few people know about: after ten years of study in Paris, the time had come to return to Savoy, home, to Annecy. Four of his companions accompanied him all the way to Lyon and bid him farewell in tears.

This helps us to understand and savour what Francis wrote towards the end of his life, giving us a rare snapshot of his heart:

“There are no souls in the world who love more warmly, more

tenderly and I would say more completely and lovingly than I since it has pleased God to make my heart thus. But just the same I love independent, vigorous souls that are not effeminate; since such great tenderness clouds the heart, worries it and distracts it from loving prayer to God, it prevents complete resignation and perfect death of self-love. What is not God is nothing to us.”

And to a woman he spoke of his thirst for friendship:

“I must tell you these few words in confidence: there is no man in the world whose heart is more tender and more thirsty for friendship than mine, or who feels separations more painfully than I do.”



Antoine FAVRE – Portrait, private collection

Source: Wikipedia

From the hundreds of recipients of his letters, I have chosen three, writing to whom Francis highlights the characteristics of Salesian friendship, as he lived it and which he proposes to us today. The first great friend we meet is his fellow citizen **Antoine Favre**. Francis, a brilliant law graduate, had a great desire to meet and earn the esteem of this luminary.

In one of his first letters we find an expression which sounds like a kind of oath:

“This gift (friendship), so appreciable even for its rarity, is truly priceless and all the more dear to me in that it could never have been due to my own merits. The ardent desire to diligently cultivate all friendships will always live in my breast!”

The first characteristic of friendship is communication, the giving of news, the sharing of moods.

Francis’ youngest sister, Jeanne, was born at the beginning of December 1593, and he promptly told his friend:

"I learn that my dearest mother, who is in her forty-second year, will soon give birth to her thirteenth child. I am going quickly to her, knowing that she rejoices greatly at my presence."

We are only a few days away from his ordination to the priesthood and Francis confides to his friend:

"You, honourable friend, seem to me to be the only one able to understand the turmoil of my mind since you deal with divine things with so much respect and so much veneration that you can easily judge how dangerous and fearful it is to preside at their celebration and how difficult it would be to celebrate them with the dignity they deserve."

Not even a year after ordination, we find Francis as a "missionary" in the Chablais: he communicates his fatigue and bitterness to his friend:

"Today I begin preaching Advent to four or five people: all the others are maliciously ignorant of the meaning of the word Advent."

A few months later he joyfully gave him news of his first apostolic successes:

"At last the first ears of corn are beginning to ripen!"

Another great friend of Francis was **Giovenale Ancina**: The two met in Rome (1599); they would both be consecrated bishops a few years later. Francis wrote several letters to him; in one he begged his friend, the Bishop of Saluzzo, to keep him "closely united with him in his heart and also deign to often give me the advice and reminders that the Holy Spirit will inspire in you."

Among the friends he met in Paris, his friendship with the famous Fr Peter de Bérulle, whom he met at Madame Acarie's group, stands out. Francis wrote to him a few days after his episcopal consecration:

"I have been a consecrated bishop since the 8th of this month, the day of Our Lady. This prompts me to beg you to help me all

the more warmly with your prayers. There is no remedy: we will always need to be washing our feet, since we are walking in dust. May our good God grant us the grace to live and die in his service.”

Another great friend of Francis was **Vincent de Paul**. A friendship was born between them that continued beyond the death of the founder of the Visitation, as Vincent took the Order to heart and became its reference point until the end of his days (1660). Vincent always remained grateful to the holy bishop from whom he had received salutary reproaches about his impetuous and touchy character. He treasured this and little by little corrected himself and, thinking of his friend, did not hesitate to describe him as “The man who best reproduced the Son of God living on earth.”

Reading these letters we discover some of the qualities that must govern true friendship: communication, prayer and service (forgiveness, correction ...).

We now come across many men and women to whom Francis addresses letters of spiritual friendship. Some examples:

To Madame de la Fléchère he writes:

“Be patient with everyone, but mainly with yourself. I mean to say that you must not be upset by your imperfections and always have the courage to recover promptly.”



St. Vincent de Paul – Founder of the Congregation of the Mission (Lazarists)

Portrait, Simon François de Tours; Source: Wikipedia

To Madame de Charmoisy he writes:

“You must be careful to begin gently, and from time to time take a look at your heart to see if it has kept sweet. If it has not kept so, soften it before doing anything.”

These letters are a **treatise on friendship**, not because they speak of friendship but because the writer lives a relationship of friendship, knows how to create a climate and a style so that it is perceived and bears good fruit in life.

The same applies to the correspondence with **his daughters, the Visitandines**.

To Mother Favre, who felt the weight of her office, he wrote:
“It is necessary to arm ourselves with a courageous humility and to reject all temptations of discouragement in the holy confidence we have in God. Since this office has been imposed on you by the will of those whom you must obey, God will place Himself at your right hand and carry it with you, or rather, He will carry it, but you will carry it too.”

To Mother de Brécharde he wrote:

“He who can maintain meekness amid pain and weariness, and peace amid worry and overwhelming cares, is well nigh perfect. Perfect evenness of temper, true gentleness and sweetness of heart, are more rare than perfect chastity, but they are so much the more to be cultivated. I commend them to you, my dearest daughter, because upon these, like the oil of a lamp, depends the flame of good example. Nothing is so edifying as a loving good temper.”



Saint Jeanne François FRÉMIOT DE CHANTAL, co-founder of the Order of the Visitation of Saint Mary
Author unknown, Monastery of the Visitation of Mary in Toledo, Ohio (USA); Source: Wikipedia

Among the various Founding Mothers, a special place belongs to the Foundress, **Jane Frances de Chantal**, to whom Francis wrote from the beginning:

“Believe firmly that I have a living and extraordinary desire to serve your spirit with all the capacity of my strength. Take advantage of my affection and use all that God has given me for the service of your spirit. Here I am all yours.”

And he declared to her:

"I love this love. It is strong, expansive, without measure or reserve, but sweet, strong, most pure and most tranquil; in a word, it is a love that lives only in God. God, who sees all the folds of my heart, knows that there is nothing in it that is not for Him and according to Him, without whom I want to be nothing to anyone."

This God whom Francis and Jane intend to serve is always present, is the guarantee that their love would always be consecration to Him alone:

"I would like to be able to express to you the feeling that I had of our dear unity today, as I took communion, because it was a great, perfect, sweet, powerful feeling, such that it could almost be called a vow, a consecration."

"Who could have fused two spirits so perfectly that they were no more than one indivisible and inseparable spirit, if not He who is unity by essence? [...]. Thousands of times each day my heart is close to you with thousands of good wishes which it presents to God for your consolation."

"The holy unity that God has wrought is stronger than all separations, and distance cannot harm it in the least. So may God always bless us with his holy love. He has made us one heart in spirit and in life."

I end with a wish, the one Francis wrote to one of the first Visitandines, Jacqueline Favre:

"How is your poor and beloved heart? Is it always courageous, and careful to avoid the surprises of sadness? Please do not torment it, not even when it has played some little nasty trick on you, but gently take it back and guide it on its way. This heart will become a great heart, made after God's own heart."

[\(continued\)](#)

St Francis de Sales. Life (1/8)

1. The early years

Francis was born in the family castle at [Thorens](#) (about 20 km from Annecy). He was seven weeks old and “it was a miracle that, in such a dangerous birth, his mother had not lost her life”. He was the eldest son followed by seven brothers and sisters. His mother, Françoise de Sionnaz, was just 15 years old while his father, Monsieur de Boisy, was 43! In those days, marriage among aristocrats was an opportunity to climb the social ladder (to gain noble titles, lands, castles...). The rest, including love, came later!



Church of St. Maurice de Thorens, France

He was baptised in the small [church of St Maurice in Thorens](#). Years later, Francis chose that humble little church for his episcopal consecration (8 December 1602).

Francis spent his early years with his three cousins in the same castle: he played with them, amused himself and contemplated the splendid nature that surrounded him. It became the great book from which he would draw a thousand examples for his own books. The education he received from his parents was clearly Catholic. ‘One must always think of God and be a man of God,’ his father said, and Francis would treasure this advice. His parents regularly attended the

parish and treated their employees fairly. They gave generously to them when needed. Francis' earliest memories were not only of the beauty of that wonderful nature, but also of the destruction and death caused by fratricidal wars in the name of the Gospel.

The time to go to school arrived: Francis left home and went to boarding school, first at [La Roche](#) for about two years and then for three years at [Annecy](#) in the company of his cousins. This time was marked by some important facts:

- he received his First Communion and Confirmation in the [church of St Dominique \(present-day Church of St Maurice\)](#) and from then on would frequently receive communion.

- he enrolled in the confraternity of the Rosary and from then on made a habit of saying the rosary daily.

- He asked to receive the tonsure: his father granted him permission, since this step did not imply the start of a clerical career at the time.

Francis was a normal, studious, obedient lad with a characteristic trait: "you never saw him make fun of anyone!" By this time, [Savoy](#) had taught him all he could. And so in 1578, with his inseparable cousins and under the watchful eye of his tutor Déage, Francis left for [Paris](#) where he was to remain for ten years as a pupil at the [Clermont college](#) run by the Jesuits.

2. Ten significant years: 1578-1588

The timetable at the College was strict and the religious precepts were also demanding. During these years Francis studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew, familiarised himself with the classics and perfected his French. He had excellent teachers. In his spare time, he frequented high-ranking circles, had free access to the Court, excelled in skills particular to the nobility, and took some theology courses at the [Sorbonne](#). In particular he listened to [Fr Génébrard's](#) Commentary on the Song of Songs and was deeply moved by it: he discovered the

passion of God for humanity in this allegory of the love of a man for a woman. He felt loved by God! But at the same time the idea of being excluded from this love grew in his thinking. He felt he was damned! He experienced a time of crisis and for six weeks did not sleep or eat. He wept and fell ill. He only emerged from this state by entrusting himself to Our Lady in the [church of St-Etienne-des-Grès](#) with an act of heroic abandonment to God's mercy and goodness. He said a Salve Regina and the temptation vanished.

Finally, having completed his final exams, he was able to leave Paris, though not without regret. What a joy it was for Francis to return home and re-embrace his parents, his little brothers and sisters who had meanwhile arrived to cheer up the family.

All for only a few months, because he had to leave once more to achieve his father's dream: to become a great lawyer.

3. The Padua years: 1588-1591

These were the decisive years for Francis on a human, cultural and spiritual level.

[Padua](#) was the capital of the Italian Renaissance with thousands of students coming from all over Europe: the universities were home to the most famous teachers, the best spirits of the time.

Here Francis studied law and at the same time developed his theological studies, read the Church Fathers, and placed himself in the hands of a wise spiritual director, Jesuit [Father Possevino](#). He came close to death's door, probably due to typhoid fever, received the sacraments and made a will: 'When I die, give my body to the medical students'. Such was the fervour for study and thirst for knowledge of the human body that medical students, short of corpses, would go to the cemetery to dig them up!

This testament of Francis is important because it speaks of a sensitivity he would retain for the rest of his life, for culture and the scientific innovations typical of the Renaissance.

He recovered, completed his studies brilliantly on 5 September 1591 and left Padua having “graduated with full marks *in utroque*” (civil and canon law). His father was proud of him.

4. Towards the priesthood: 1593

There were other dreams in Francis’ heart, far removed from his father’s, but how to tell him? Monsieur de Boisy placed all his hopes in Francis!

Francis was appointed [Provost](#) of [Annecy Cathedral](#). On the strength of this honorary title, he met with his father to tell him of his intention to become a priest. It was a harsh and understandable confrontation.

“I thought and hoped that you would be the staff of my old age and the support of the family...I do not share your intentions, but I do not deny you my blessing,” his father concluded.

The way to the priesthood was open: in a few months, Francis received minor orders, the sub-diaconate, the diaconate and finally, on 18 December, priestly ordination. He spent three days preparing to celebrate his first mass on 21 December.

A few days after Christmas, Francis de Sales could be officially “installed” as provost of the cathedral and on that occasion he delivered one of his most famous addresses, a veritable [harangue](#). One can already sense the ardour and zeal of the pastor, in tune with what the [Council of Trent](#) had indicated as the way to reform.

5. Missionary in the Chablais: 1594-1598

The [Chablais](#) is the territory bordering Lake [Geneva](#). The priests in this area of Savoy had been driven out by the [Calvinists](#) in Geneva and the churches were without pastors. But now, in 1594, [Duke Charles Emmanuel](#) had reconquered the area and urged the Bishop of Annecy to send new missionaries. The proposal was passed on to the clergy, but no one had the courage to go to such hostile areas, risking their lives. Only Francis declared himself available and on 14 September, with his cousin Louis, he left for this mission.

He took up residence in [the Allinges](#), a castle where Baron

d'Hermance watched over his safety. Every morning, after Mass, he went down in search of the elders of [Thonon](#). On Sundays he preached in the [church of St Hippolytus](#), but the faithful were few in number. So he decided to write and have his sermons printed: he posted them in public places and slid them under the door of Catholics and Protestants alike.



Chapel of the Château des Allinges, France

His model was Jesus on the streets of Palestine: he was inspired by his gentleness and goodness, his frankness and sincerity. There was no lack of hostility and rejection, but 'the first ears of corn', the first conversions did come about. He was stern and inflexible towards error and those who spread heresy, but of unlimited patience towards all those he considered victims of the heretics' theories.

"I love preaching that relies more on love of neighbour than on indignation, even of the Huguenots, whom one must treat with great compassion, not by flattering them, but by deploring them." The Salesian spirit seems to be concentrated in this expression of Francis: **"Truth that is not charitable springs from charity that is not true"**.

The initiative to celebrate **the three Christmas Masses** in the church of St Hippolytus in 1596 is still worth remembering as a reminder, in this extraordinary period, of Francis' zeal, kindness and courage.

But the initiative that contributed most to dismantling heresy in the Chablais was [Forty Hour](#) devotion promoted and led by Francis' new collaborator, Fr Cherubin de la Maurienne. The devotion was celebrated at [Annemasse](#) in 1597, on the outskirts of Geneva.

The following year the Forty Hours were held at Thonon (beginning of October 1598).

At the end of the year, Francis had to leave the "mission" and go to [Rome](#) to deal with various problems of the diocese.

He made important friends in Rome ([Bellarmine](#), [Baronio](#), [Ancina](#)...) and met the priests of the [Oratory of St Philip Neri](#) and fell in love with their spirit.

He returned to Annecy via [Loreto](#), then by ship he sailed up to [Venice](#); he stopped in [Bologna](#) and [Turin](#) where he discussed with the Duke how much the Pope had granted to the parishes of the diocese.

In 1602, he went to Paris again to negotiate with the Nuncio and the King on delicate diplomatic issues concerning the diocese and relations with the Calvinists. He remained there for nine long months but returned home empty-handed. Despite this being the diplomatic result, the spiritual and human profit was able to draw from it was very rich and important.

Decisive for Francis' life was his encounter with the famous '[Madame Acarie](#)' group: it was a kind of spiritual gathering where the works of [St Teresa of Avila](#) and [St John of the Cross](#) were read. Thanks to this spiritual movement, the reformed Carmelite Order would be introduced to France.

On his way back, Francis received the news that his beloved bishop had died.

6. Francis, Bishop of Geneva: 1602–1622

Francis was consecrated bishop on 8 December 1602, in the little church of Thorens, and remained at the head of his diocese for twenty years. "On that day God took me from myself to take me for himself and thus give me to the people, meaning that he had transformed me from what I was for me into what I should be for them."

Let me highlight three important aspects of this period:

6.1 Francis the pastor

During these years his zeal shone through in the words: "***Da mihi animas***" which became his programme.

"The priest is all for God and all for the people" he used to say, and he was the model of this first of all!

The problems of the diocese were many and very serious: they concerned the clergy, the monasteries, the training of future

ministers, the non-existent seminary, catechesis, the lack of economic resources.

Francis immediately began visiting the more than four hundred parishes. This period of visitation lasted five or six years: he spoke with the priests, comforted, encouraged, solved the most thorny problems, preached, administered the sacrament of Confirmation to children or future spouses, celebrated weddings...

To remedy the ignorance of the clergy, he taught theology at home, and gathered his priests together in synod each year. He preached... "For some years, he taught many theological subjects to his canons in Annecy and dictated lessons to them in Latin."

There were many who aspired to religious life or the priesthood: it was not vocations that were lacking. It was very often a real sense of vocation that was lacking!

He wrote a pamphlet, *Advice to Confessors*, a jewel of pastoral zeal where doctrine, personal experience, advice were interwoven...

He visited the numerous monasteries in the diocese: some he closed, had people in others transferred elsewhere, founded new ones.

He struggled to have a seminary, right to the end: funds were lacking due to the selfishness of the Knights of St Lazarus and St Maurice, who withheld the revenues due to the diocese. The dominant characteristic in Francis the pastor was his ability **to accompany people**.

"It is a real effort to guide individual souls, but an effort that makes one feel it is as light as the reapers' and harvesters' efforts, who are never as happy as when they have much work and a big load to carry."

The characteristics of this individualised style of education: **Richness of humanity**: "There are no souls in the world who love more warmly, more tenderly and I would say more completely and lovingly than I since it has pleased God to make my heart thus."

Father and brother: he could be very demanding, but always in

a gentle and serene way. He never avoided the real issue at stake: just read the first part of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* to realise this.

Prudence and practicality: “Be kind to yourself during this pregnancy... if you get tired of kneeling, sit down, and if you don’t have enough attention to pray for half an hour, pray for just a quarter of an hour...” (Madame de la Fléchère)

Sense of God: “You need to do everything through love and nothing through constraint; love obedience more than you fear disobedience. “May God be the God of your heart.”

Francis was described as the truest copy of Jesus on earth ([St. Vincent de Paul](#))

6.2 Francis the writer:

Despite the commitments associated with his being a bishop, Francis found time to devote himself to writing. Writing what?

Thousands of letters to people asking for his spiritual guidance, to the newly founded monasteries of the Visitation, to prominent members of the nobility or the Church to try to solve problems, and to his family and friends.

The *Introduction to the Devout Life* was published in 1608: it is Francis’ best known work.

“It is in the character, in the genius, but above all in the heart of Francis de Sales that one must seek the true origin and remote preparation of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* or *Philothea*”: thus wrote Dom B. Mackey, a man who dedicated his life to the study of the Saint’s works, in the introduction to the Annecy critical edition.

The preface bears the date of 8 August 1608.

This book received **an enthusiastic reception**.

La [Chantal](#) speaks of it as “a book dictated by the Holy Spirit”. In its 400 years of life, the book has had over 1300 editions with millions of copies, translated into all the languages of the world.

Four centuries later, these pages still retain their charm and relevance.

In 1616, another of Francis' writings appeared: *The Treatise on the Love of God*, his masterpiece, written for those who want to aim for the heights! He guides them with wisdom and experience to live total abandonment to God's will... up to the point "where lovers meet!" that is, to Calvary. Only the saints know how to lead us to holiness.

6.3 Francis the founder

In 1604, Francis went to [Dijon](#) to preach for [Lent](#), invited by the Archbishop of [Bourges](#), Andrew Fremyot. From the outset he was struck by the attention and devout behaviour of one woman there, Baroness Jeanne François [Jane Frances] Fremyot, the archbishop's sister.

Between 1604, the year Jane met Francis, until 1610, the date Jane entered the novitiate at Annecy, the two saints met four or five times, each time for a week or ten days. The meetings were enlivened by the presence of various people from the family (Francis' mother, sister) or friends (Madame Brulart, the abbess of Puy d'Orbe...).

Jane Frances would have wanted to speed things up, but Francis proceeded with caution.

Little by little the various knots were loosened, they found consensus, serenity and peace grew and this allowed the problems to be better resolved.

God had taken possession of her heart and made her a woman ready to give her life for Him. Her long-cherished dream came true on 6 June 1610: a historic day! Jane Frances and her two friends (Giacomina Favre and Carlotta de Brécard) entered a small house, "[la Galerie](#)" and began their novitiate year.

On 6 June the following year the three made their first professions before Francis. Meanwhile, other young people and women asked to be received. Thus began the religious family inspired by the Visitation of Mary.

The expansion of the new [Order](#) was prodigious. Some figures: from 1611 (year of foundation) to 1622 (year of Francis' death) there were thirteen foundations: Annecy, [Lyon](#), [Moulins](#), [Grenoble](#), Bourges, Paris.... By the time of Jane Frances' death

in 1641, there would be 87 monasteries with an average of over 3 new ones per year! Among them two in Piedmont: Turin and [Pinerolo](#)!

7. Final years

Francis had to take the road to Paris twice in the last years of his life: important diplomatic and spiritual journeys, tiring journeys for him as he was already tired and in ill health.

Francis' reputation for holiness was known in Paris to the point that [Cardinal Henri de Gondi](#) thought of him as his likely successor and put it to him. Francis' sympathetic reply can be noted: "I married a poor woman (the diocese of Annecy); I cannot divorce to marry a rich one (the diocese of Paris)!"

In the last year of his life he undertook another trip to Pinerolo, Piedmont, at the Pope's request, to restore peace in a monastery at Foglianti (reformed Cistercians) who could not agree on their superior general. Francis managed to reconcile minds and hearts to their unanimous satisfaction.

Another order from the Duke required Francis to accompany [Cardinal Maurice of Savoy](#) to [Avignon](#) to meet [King Louis XIII](#).

On his return, he stopped in [Lyon at the Visitandine Monastery](#). Here he met Jane Frances de Chantal for the last time. He was exhausted, but still preached until the end, which came on 28 December 1622.

Francis died with a dream: to retire from the affairs of the diocese and to spend the last years of his life in the peaceful [Monastery at Talloires](#), on the shores of the lake, writing what he thought of as his final work, a *Treatise on the Love of Neighbour*, and praying the Rosary. We can be certain that he had already written this book through the example of his life; as for praying the Rosary, he now lacks neither time nor the tranquillity.

[\(continued\)](#)

