

# 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)

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## 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 Brécharde) 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)

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## 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 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.”



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.”

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# 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.

[\(continued\)](#)

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