

APOSTOLIC LETTER

TOTUM AMORIS EST

OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS

ON THE FOURTH CENTENARY

OF THE DEATH OF SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES

“EVERYTHING PERTAINS TO LOVE”.¹ These words summarize the spiritual legacy left to us by Saint Francis de Sales, who died four centuries ago, on 28 December 1622, in Lyon. Slightly more than fifty years of age, he had been the “exiled” Bishop and Prince of Geneva for some two decades, and had come to Lyon on what was to be his last diplomatic mission. The Duke of Savoy had asked him to accompany Cardinal Maurice of Savoy to Avignon, where they were to pay homage to the young King Louis XIII, then returning to Paris through the Rhône valley following a victorious military campaign in the south of France. Exhausted and in poor health, Francis had undertaken the journey in a pure spirit of service. “Were it not most helpful to them for me to make this trip, I would surely have many good reasons to excuse myself. Yet if I can be of help, alive or dead, I will not refuse, but go or let myself be dragged there”². That was his temperament. Upon his arrival in Lyon, he stayed at the monastery of the Visitation Sisters, in the gardener’s lodge, so as not to be a burden and to be free to meet with anyone who so desired.

Long disenchanted by the “fleeting glories of the court”,³ he spent those final days exercising his pastoral ministry amid a flurry of appointments: confessions, conversations, conferences, sermons, and, of course, letters of spiritual friendship. The deepest reason for such a way of life, completely centred on God, had become clearer to him over time. He explained it with simplicity and precision in his celebrated *Treatise on the Love of God*: “At the very thought of God, one immediately feels a certain delightful emotion of the heart, which testifies that God is God of the human heart”.⁴ These words are a perfect synthesis of his thought. An experience of God is intrinsic to the human heart. Far from a mental construct, it is a recognition, filled with awe and gratitude, of God’s self-manifestation. In the heart and through the heart, there comes about a subtle, intense and unifying process in which we come to know God and, at the same time, ourselves, our own origins and depths, and our fulfilment in the call to love. We discover that faith is no blind emotion, but primarily an attitude of the heart, whereby we entrust ourselves to a truth that appeals to our consciousness as a “sweet emotion” and awakens in response, as he was wont to say, an enduring benevolence towards all of creation.

¹ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*, Preface: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 336.

² ID., Lett. 2103: À Monsieur Sylvestre de Saluces de la Mente, Abbé d’Hautecombe (3 November 1622), in *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales*, XXVI, Annecy, 1932, 490-491.

³ ID., Lett. 1961: À une Dame (19 December 1622), in *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales*, XX (*Lettres*, X: 1621-1622), Annecy, 1918, 395.

⁴ ID., *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*, I, 15: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 395.

In this light, we can understand why Saint Francis de Sales felt that there was no better place to find God, and to help others to find him, than in the hearts of the women and men of his time. He had learned this, from his earliest years, by developing a keen insight both into himself and into the human heart.

Francis' profound sense of God's presence amid the events of daily life was evident in those last days in Lyon. He shared with his Visitation Sisters how he wished to be remembered by them: "I said everything in just two words, when I told you to refuse nothing and to desire nothing; I have nothing more to say to you".⁵ This was no mere voluntarism, "a will lacking humility",⁶ the subtle temptation along the path to holiness that confuses it with self-justification, the worship of the human will and its powers, and results in "a self-centred and elitist complacency, bereft of true love".⁷ Still less was it a matter of pure quietism, a passive and emotionless abandonment to a doctrine stripped of the flesh and history.⁸ Instead, it was the fruit of his contemplation of the life of the incarnate Son. On 26 December, the saint spoke to the Sisters from the heart of the Christmas mystery: "Do you see the baby Jesus in the crib? He accepts all the discomforts of that season, the bitter cold and everything that the Father lets happen to him. He does not refuse the small consolations that his Mother gives him; we are not told that he ever reached out for his Mother's breast, but left everything to her care and concern. So too, we ourselves should neither desire nor refuse anything, but accept all that God sends us, the bitter cold and the discomforts of the season".⁹ We are struck by how Francis recognized the importance of concern for the human dimension. At the school of the incarnation, he had learned to interpret history and to approach life with confidence and trust.

The criterion of love

By experience, Francis had come to realize that desire is at the root of all true spiritual life, but also the cause of its debasement. Drawing abundantly from the spiritual tradition that had preceded him, he recognized the importance of constantly testing desire through the exercise of discernment. He found the ultimate criterion for this assessment in love. In that final conference in Lyon, on the feast of Saint Stephen, two days before his death, he had said: "It is love that grants perfection to our works. I will tell you much more. Take a person who suffers martyrdom for God with an ounce of love; that person merits much, since he could give nothing greater than his own life. Yet another person who has only suffered a scratch with two ounces of love will have much more merit, because it is charity and love that give value to our works".¹⁰

With remarkable realism, Francis went on to speak of the complex relationship between contemplation and action: "You know, or you should know, that contemplation is in itself better than activity and the active life; nonetheless, if one finds greater union [with God] in the active life, then that is better. If a Sister in the kitchen holding a pan over the fire has greater love and charity than another Sister, that material fire will not hold her back but instead help her to become more pleasing to God. It frequently happens that people are united to God as much in activity as in solitude; in the end, it always comes back to the question of where the greatest love is to be found".¹¹ This, then, is the truly important thing, more important than any kind of useless rigidity or self-absorption: to keep asking at every moment, in every decision, in every situation in life, where the greatest love is to be found. Not by chance, Saint John Paul II would call Francis de Sales the

⁵ ID., *Entretiens spirituels*, Dernier entretien [21]: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 1319.

⁶ Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (19 March 2018), 49: AAS 110 (2018), 1124.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57: AAS 110 (2018), 1127.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, Nos. 37-39: AAS 110 (2018), 1121-1122.

⁹ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, *Entretiens spirituels*, Dernier entretien [21]: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 1319.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1308.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

“Doctor of Divine Love”,¹² not simply because he had written a weighty Treatise on that subject, but first and foremost because he was an outstanding witness to that love. His writings were no theory concocted behind a desk, far from the concerns of ordinary people. His teachings were the fruit of a great sensitivity to experience. He merely translated into doctrine what, enlightened by the Spirit, he had experienced and learned in the course of his remarkably innovative pastoral activity. We find it summed up in the Preface to the *Treatise on the Love of God*: “In Holy Church, everything pertains to love, lives in love, is done for love and comes from love”.¹³

Early education: the adventure of coming to know oneself in God

Francis was born on 21 August 1567 in the Castle of Sales, near Thorens, the son of François de Nouvelles, Lord of Bois, and Françoise de Sionnaz. “His life spanned two centuries, the sixteenth and the seventeenth, and he embodied the best of the teachings and cultural achievements of the century then drawing to a close, reconciling the inheritance of humanism with the striving for the Absolute proper to the currents of mysticism”.¹⁴

After his early education, first in the College of La Roche-sur-Foron and then in that of Annecy, Francis went to Paris, to the recently founded Jesuit College of Clermont. In the capital of the Kingdom of France, devastated by the wars of religion, he experienced two consecutive interior crises that would have a lasting mark on his life. A fervent prayer offered in the Church of Saint-Étienne-des-Grès, before the Black Madonna of Paris, would kindle, amid the darkness of his heart, a fire that would continue to burn within him and provide the key to understanding his own experience and that of others. “Whatever may happen, Lord, you who hold everything in your hands and whose ways are all justice and truth, ... I will love you, Lord, ... I will love you here, O my God; I will hope always in your mercy and ever repeat your praise... O Lord Jesus, you will always be my hope and my salvation in the land of the living”.¹⁵

Attaining peace, Francis recorded those words in his journal. The experience of this crisis, with its anxiety and uncertainties, would remain illuminating for him, and provide him with a singular approach to the mystery of God’s relationship with humanity. It helped him gain insight into the lives of others and to recognize, with a refined spirit of discernment, the interior attitude that unites thought and feeling, reason and affections, which he called the “God of the human heart”. As a result, Francis was never in danger of attributing theoretical importance to his own personal experience and absolutizing it. Rather, he learned something remarkable, the fruit of grace: the ability to discern, in God, his own lived experience and that of others.

Although he never claimed to develop a theological system as such, his reflection on the spiritual life proved to be of outstanding theological importance, for it embodied two essential dimensions of any genuine theology. The first is *the spiritual life* itself, for it is in humble and persevering prayer, in openness to the Holy Spirit, that we attempt to understand and communicate the word of God; theologians emerge from the crucible of prayer. The second is *the life of the Church*, the ability to think in the Church and with the Church. Theology itself has felt the effects of our individualist culture, yet Christian theologians are called to carry out their work immersed in the life of the community, breaking within it the bread of the word.¹⁶ The thought

¹² *Letter to the Right Reverend Yves Boivineau, Bishop of Annecy, on the Fourth Centenary of the Episcopal Ordination of Saint Francis de Sales*, 23 November 2002, 3: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XXV/2 (2002), 767.

¹³ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*, Préface, ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 336.

¹⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Catechesis*, 2 March 2011: *Insegnamenti VII/1* (2011), 270.

¹⁵ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, *Fragments d’écrits intimes*, 3: *Acte d’abandon héroïque*, in *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales*, XXII (*Opuscules*, I), Annecy, 1925, 41.

¹⁶ Cf. *Address to the International Theological Commission* (29 November 2019): *L’Osservatore Romano*, 30 November 2019, p. 8.

of Francis de Sales, albeit on the margins of the scholarly disputes of his age and respectful of them, was characterized by these two essential dimensions.

The discovery of a new world

After completing his course in the humanities, Francis took up studies in law at the University of Padua. On his return to Annecy, he had already decided upon the direction of his life, despite resistance on the part of his father. Ordained a priest on 18 December 1593, in early September of the following year, at the request of Bishop Claude de Granier, he was called to carry out a difficult mission in Le Chablais, a territory belonging to the Diocese of Annecy. Though Calvinist, Le Chablais, through an intricate web of wars and peace treaties, had passed once more under the control of the Duchy of Savoy. These were intense and exciting years, when Francis discovered his gifts as a mediator and a man of dialogue, as well as a certain intransigence that he would later acknowledge. He also devised several bold and original pastoral practices, like the famous *affiches* posted everywhere and even slipped under house doors.

In 1602, Francis returned to Paris, charged with pursuing a sensitive diplomatic mission on behalf of Bishop de Granier at the specific direction of the Apostolic See, following yet another change in the political and religious landscape of the territory of the Diocese of Geneva. Despite the good intentions of the King of France, the mission was a failure. To Pope Clement VIII he wrote, “After nine whole months, I have been forced to retrace my steps, having accomplished almost nothing”.¹⁷ Yet that mission proved unexpectedly enriching for him and for the Church from the human, cultural and religious standpoint. In whatever free time his diplomatic negotiations allowed, Francis preached in the presence of the King of France and his court. He formed important friendships and, above all, immersed himself completely in the extraordinary spiritual and cultural blossoming of the modern capital of the Kingdom.

There everything was in constant ferment. Francis was impressed and intrigued by the great issues emerging in the world, by the novel ways in which they were being approached, by the new and remarkable interest in spirituality and the unprecedented questions it raised. In a word, he sensed an authentic “epochal shift” that demanded a response couched in language both old and new. This was certainly not the first time that he had encountered individual fervent Christians, but now things were different. Paris was no longer the city devastated by the wars of religion that he had known in the years of his education, or by the bitter conflicts that he had seen in the Chablais. Instead, he encountered something unexpected: a flood “of saints, true saints, in great numbers and in all places”.¹⁸ There were men and women of culture, professors of the Sorbonne, civil authorities, princes and princesses, servants and maids, men and women religious. A whole world athirst for God in a variety of ways.

Encountering those people and their questions was among the most significant and providential events of his life. Days that had seemed useless and unfruitful thus became an incomparable school for interpreting the spirit of the age, without pandering to it. Francis, the skilful and untiring controversialist, was being transformed by grace into an insightful observer of his times and an extraordinary director of souls. His pastoral activity, his great works – the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God* – and the thousands of letters on spiritual friendship he wrote to convents and monasteries, to religious and nuns, and to courtiers and ordinary folk, to say nothing of his encounter with Jane Frances de Chantal and the foundation of the Order of the Visitation in 1610: none of these would be conceivable apart from that

¹⁷ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, Lett. 165: À Sa Sainteté Clément VIII (end of October, 1602), in *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales*, XII (*Lettres*, II: 1599-1604), Annecy, 1902, 128.

¹⁸ H. BREMOND, *L'humanisme dévôt: 1580-1660*, in *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France: depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, I, Jérôme Millon, Grenoble, 2006, 131.

interior turning point. Gospel and culture thus found in him a fruitful synthesis, which led to the development of a method that, once it had taken shape, was to reap an abundant and enduring harvest.

In one of his very first letters on spiritual direction and friendship, sent to a religious community he had visited in Paris, Francis spoke quite modestly of “his method”, which differed from others and aimed at genuine reform. It was a method that renounced all harshness and respected completely the dignity and gifts of a devout soul, whatever its frailties. He wrote: “I wonder whether another difficulty can also be raised concerning your reform: perhaps those who imposed it on you have treated the wound too harshly... I appreciate their method, although it is not what I am in the habit of using, especially with regard to noble and cultivated spirits like yours. I believe it is better simply to indicate the disease and put the scalpel in their hands, so that they themselves can make the necessary incision. Yet do not for this reason neglect the reform that you need”.¹⁹ These words display that insight that was to make Salesian optimism famous and leave a lasting mark on the history of spirituality through its later flowering, as, for example, in the case of Saint John Bosco some two centuries later.

Upon his return to Annecy, Francis was ordained a bishop on 8 December of that same year 1602. The influence of his episcopal ministry on the Europe of his day and for centuries afterwards was immense. “He was an apostle, preacher, writer, a man of action and of prayer, devoted to realizing the ideals of the Council of Trent. Engaged in controversies and dialogue with the Protestants, he came to realize increasingly, along with the need for theological discussion, the effectiveness of personal relationships and charity. He was charged with diplomatic missions in Europe and with tasks of mediation and reconciliation in society”.²⁰ Above all else, Francis was an interpreter of epochal changes and a spiritual guide in an age of renewed thirst for God.

Charity does everything for her children

Between 1620 and 1621, as he neared the end of his life, Francis wrote to one of his priests a letter that sheds light on his view of the times in which he lived. He encouraged his correspondent’s desire to compose new works to respond to new questions, and showed that he recognized the need for such works. “I must tell you that as I become more aware each day of the humours of the world, I desire ever more passionately that God in his goodness should inspire one of his servants to write in a way suited to the tastes of this poor world”.²¹ He gave as his reason his own view of the age: “The world is becoming so delicate that, in a little while, no one will dare any longer to touch it except with velvet gloves, or tend its wounds except with perfumed bandages; yet what does it matter, if only men and women are healed and finally saved? Charity, our queen, does everything for her children”.²² This was no pious platitude or an expression of resignation in the face of defeat. Rather, it was a realization that the world was changing and the mark of a completely evangelical sense of the need to respond to those changes.

Francis had early come to that realization and he expressed it in his Preface to the *Treatise on the Love of God*: “I have taken into consideration the thinking of people of this age, nor could I do otherwise: it is very important to keep in mind the times in which one writes”.²³ Then, begging the reader’s indulgence, he went on: “If you find the style a little different from that which I used in the *Introduction*, and both of them different

¹⁹ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, Lett. 168: *Aux religieuses du monastère des «Filles-Dieu»* (22 November 1602), in *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales*, XII (*Lettres*, II: 1599-1604), Annecy, 1902, 105.

²⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Catechesis*, 2 March 2011: *Insegnamenti*, VII/1 (2011), 272.

²¹ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, Lett. 1869: *À M. Pierre Jay* (1620 or 1621), in *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales*, XX (*Lettres*, X: 1621-1622) Annecy, 1918, 219.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *ID.*, *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*, Préface: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 339.

from the style of the *Defence of the Cross*, you should know that much is learned and forgotten in nineteen years. The language of warfare differs from that of peace, and we speak in one way to young apprentices and in another to older confreres".²⁴ Yet in response to changing times, where should one begin, if not from the history of God's dealings with humanity? This was the ultimate intent of the Treatise: "My intention is but to represent, with simplicity and straightforwardly, without artifice and certainly without false colours, the history of the birth, progress, decline, operations, properties, advantages and sublime qualities of divine love".²⁵

The demands of an epochal shift

On this anniversary of the fourth centenary of his death, I have given much thought to the legacy of Saint Francis de Sales for our time. I find that his flexibility and his far-sighted vision have much to say to us. Partly by God's gift and partly thanks to his own character, but also by his steady cultivation of lived experience, Francis perceived clearly that the times were changing. On his own, he might never have imagined that those changes represented so great an opportunity for the preaching of the Gospel. The word of God that he had loved from his youth now opened up before him new and unexpected horizons in a rapidly changing world.

That same task awaits us in this, our own age of epochal change. We are challenged to be a Church that is outward-looking and free of all worldliness, even as we live in this world, share people's lives and journey with them in attentive listening and acceptance.²⁶ That is what Francis de Sales did when he discerned the events of his times with the help of God's grace. Today he bids us set aside undue concern for ourselves, for our structures and for what society thinks about us, and consider instead the real spiritual needs and expectations of our people.²⁷ In our own time too, it is helpful to revisit some of the crucial decisions he made, so that we for our part can respond to today's changes with the wisdom born of the Gospel.

Wind and wings

The first of those decisions was to reinterpret and propose anew to each man and woman, in his or her specific condition, the beauty of our relationship with God. The ultimate reason and practical purpose of his *Treatise* was to illustrate to his contemporaries the attractiveness of the love of God. "What", he asks, "are the 'cords' that God's providence uses to draw our hearts to his love?"²⁸ Echoing the words of the prophet Hosea (11:4),²⁹ he defines those ordinary means as "cords of humanity, charity and friendship". "Clearly", he writes, "we are not drawn to God by chains of iron, like bulls or oxen, but by invitations, enticements and holy inspirations; these are the *cords of Adam and of human kindness*, rightly befitting the human heart, which is naturally free".³⁰ By those same cords, God brought his people forth from slavery, taught them to walk and held them by the hand, like fathers and mothers with their children. His was not the way of external imposition, despotic and arbitrary power, or violence, but that of a persuasiveness that respects our human freedom. "The power of grace" – Francis continues, surely thinking of the many life stories he had encountered – "does not constrain the heart, but attracts it. Grace possesses a holy violence, not to violate our liberty but to guide it to love. Grace acts strongly, yet in such a pleasing way that our will is not

²⁴ Ibid., 347.

²⁵ Ibid., 338-339.

²⁶ Cf. *Address to Bishops, Priests, Religious, Seminarians and Catechists*, Bratislava, 13 September 2021, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13 September 2021, pp. 11-12.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁸ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, II, 12: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 444.

²⁹ "I led them with cords of human kindness [Vulgate: *in funiculis Adam*], with bands of love; I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them".

³⁰ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, II, 12: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 444.

overwhelmed by so powerful a force; while pressing us, it does not oppress our liberty. Consequently, we are able, before all its might, to consent to or resist its promptings at our pleasure”.³¹

Earlier, Francis had spoken of this relationship using a curious example drawn from ornithology: “There are certain birds, Theotimos, that Aristotle calls ‘apodans’, because they have such short and weak legs as to be of no use to them; it is as if they did not even have them. Should they fall to the ground, they remain there, unable to take flight because, without the use of legs or feet, they cannot rise and take wing. Consequently, they remain on the ground and die there, unless a gust of wind, compensating for their inability, lifts them up, as it often does with other things. If, in that case, they flap their wings in response to the thrust of the wind, the wind itself will continue to help them by thrusting them ever higher, in order to help them to fly higher and higher”.³² The same holds true for us: we were created by God to fly, to spread our wings in response to the call to love, but once we fall to earth, unless we choose to open those wings to the wind of the Spirit, we risk never again being able to fly.

This, then, is how God’s grace comes to us: by “cords of Adam”, bonds of humanity and love. God’s power can always lift us up to take flight, yet his *douceur*, his loving kindness, is such that he respects our freedom. It is up to us either to take flight or to remain on the ground. Even as he bestows his grace, God would not have us rise without our consent. Francis can thus conclude: “God’s inspirations, Theotimos, anticipate us and make themselves felt before we are even aware of them, but once we become aware of them, it is up to us either to consent and follow their lead, or to refuse and reject them. They make themselves felt by us without us; yet without us they do not bring about our consent”.³³ In our relationship with God we always experience a gratuitousness that testifies to the depth of the Father’s love for us.

At the same time, this grace never makes us passive. It leads us to realize that God’s love radically precedes us, and that his first gift consists precisely in our acceptance of that love. Each person therefore is responsible for cooperating with his or her own fulfilment, with spreading his or her wings with confident trust before the gust of God’s wind. Here we see an important aspect of our human vocation. “In the Genesis account, God commands Adam and Eve to be fruitful. Humankind has a mandate to change, to build, to master creation in the positive sense of creating from it and with it. So what is to come doesn’t depend on some unseen mechanism, a future in which humanity is a passive spectator. No: we are protagonists, we are – if I can stretch the word – *co-creators*”.³⁴ That is what Francis de Sales recognized and sought to pass on through his ministry of spiritual guidance.

True devotion

A second great crucial decision of Francis was to approach the issue of devotion. Here too, as in our own day, the dawning of a new age had raised a number of questions. Two aspects of the issue need to be understood and re-appropriated today. The first regards the very idea of devotion, the second its universal and popular character. At the beginning of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Francis clarifies the meaning of devotion: “It is necessary, first of all, to know in what the virtue of devotion consists. There is only one true devotion, and many false and vain ones. Unless you can distinguish true devotion, you can fall into error and waste your time running after some useless and superstitious devotion”.³⁵

³¹ *Ibid.*, II, 12: 444-445.

³² *Ibid.*, II, 9: 434.

³³ *Ibid.*, II, 12: 446.

³⁴ *Let Us Dream. The Path to a Better Future. In conversation with Austen Ivereigh*, New York, 2020, 4.

³⁵ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, *Introduction à la vie dévote*, I, 1: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 31.

Francis' description of false devotion is delightful and ever timely. Everyone can relate to it, since he salts it with good humour. "Someone attached to fasting will consider himself devout because he doesn't eat, even though his heart is filled with bitterness; and while, out of love for sobriety, he will not let a drop of wine, or even water, touch his tongue, he will not scruple to drench it in the blood of his neighbour through gossip and slander. Another will consider himself devout because all day long he mumbles a string of prayers, yet remains heedless of the evil, arrogant and hurtful words that his tongue hurls at his servants and neighbours. Yet another will readily open his purse to give alms to the poor, but cannot wring an ounce of mercy from his heart in order to forgive his enemies. Another still will pardon his enemies, yet never even think of paying his debts; it will take a lawsuit to make him do so".³⁶ All these, of course, are perennial vices and struggles, and they lead the saint to conclude that "all these fine people, commonly considered devout, most surely are not".³⁷

The origin of true devotion is to be found elsewhere; its deepest roots are in God's life dwelling within our hearts. "True and lively devotion presupposes the love of God; indeed, it is none other than a genuine, and not generic, love of God".³⁸ In Francis' lively language, devotion is "a sort of spiritual alertness and energy whereby charity acts within us or, we act by means of it, with promptness and affection".³⁹ For this reason, devotion does not exist alongside charity, but is one of its manifestations, while at the same time leading back to it. Devotion is like a flame with regard to fire: it increases the intensity of charity without altering its quality. "In the end, charity and devotion can be said to differ from one another as fire from a flame. Charity is a spiritual fire that, when fanned into flame, is called devotion. Devotion thus adds nothing to the fire of charity but the flame that makes charity prompt, active and diligent, not only in the observance of God's commandments but also in the exercise of his divine counsels and inspirations".⁴⁰ Understood in this way, devotion is far from something abstract. Rather, it becomes a style of life, a way of living immersed in our concrete daily existence. It embraces and discovers meaning in the little things: food and dress, work and relaxation, love and parenthood, conscientiousness in the fulfilment of our duties. In a word, it sheds light on the vocation of each individual.

Here we begin to see the popular dimension of devotion, which is present from the very first words of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*: "Almost all those who have treated of devotion have sought to instruct persons living apart from the world, or at least they have taught a kind of devotion that leads to such isolation. I intend to offer my teachings to those who live in cities, in families, at court and who, by virtue of their state in life, are obliged to live in the midst of others".⁴¹ Those who think that devotion is restricted to some quiet and secluded setting are greatly mistaken. Devotion is meant for everyone, in every situation, and each of us can practise it in accordance with our own vocation. As Saint Paul VI wrote on the fourth centenary of the birth of Francis de Sales, "Holiness is not the prerogative of any one group, but an urgent summons addressed to every Christian: 'Friend, come up higher' (Lk 14:10). All of us are called to ascend the mountain of God, albeit not each by the same path. 'Devotion must be practiced differently by the gentleman, the craftsman, the chamberlain, the prince, the widow, the young woman, the wife. Moreover, the practice of devotion must be adapted to the abilities, affairs and duties of each'".⁴² To live in the midst of the secular city while

³⁶ Ibid.: 31-32.

³⁷ Ibid.: 32.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 33.

⁴¹ Ibid., Preface: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 23.

⁴² Apostolic Epistle *Sabaudiae Gemma* on the Fourth Centenary of the Birth of Saint Francis de Sales, Doctor of the Church (29 January 1967): AAS 59 (1967), 119.

nurturing the interior life, to combine the desire for perfection with every state of life, and to discover an interior peace that does not separate us from the world but teaches us how to live in it and to appreciate it, but also to maintain a proper detachment from it. That was the aim of Francis de Sales, and it remains a valuable lesson for men and women in our own time.

This was also the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the universal vocation to holiness: “Strengthened by so many and such great means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord – each in his or her own way – to that perfect holiness by which the Father himself is perfect”.⁴³ Each in his or her own way... “We should not grow discouraged before examples of holiness that appear unattainable”.⁴⁴ Mother Church proposes them to us not to copy them, but so that we can be spurred on in our pursuit of the specific path that the Lord has chosen for each of us. “The most important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts (cf. *1 Cor 12:7*)”.⁴⁵

The ecstasy of life

Saint Francis thus came to view the entirety of the Christian life as “the ecstasy of work and life”.⁴⁶ For him, Christianity was not to be confused with a facile escapism or self-absorption, much less a dull and dreary obedience. We know that this danger can always be present in the life of faith. Indeed, “there are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter”, and while we can understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, “slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith begin to revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress”.⁴⁷

Allowing joy to blossom in our hearts is what Francis de Sales means by “the ecstasy of work and life”. In this way, “we live not only a civil, honest and Christian life, but a superhuman, spiritual, devout and ecstatic life, a life that in any case is beyond and above our natural condition”.⁴⁸ Here we arrive at the central, luminous pages of the Treatise, where that “ecstasy” is presented as the joyous exuberance of a Christian life that transcends the mediocrity of mere conformity. “Not to steal, lie, or swear in vain; to love and honour one’s father; not to kill: this is to live in accord with natural reason. But to forsake all our goods, to love poverty, to call her and consider her a most delightful mistress, to consider reproach, persecution and martyrdom as happiness and blessing, to preserve absolute chastity, to live in the world contrary to all the wisdom of the world and against the tide of this life by habitual resignation, renunciation and acts of self-abnegation: this is not to live in ourselves, but above and beyond ourselves. And because no one can go out of and above himself in this manner unless the eternal Father draw him, it follows that this kind of life is a perpetual rapture and a continual ecstasy of action and operation”.⁴⁹

A life, in other words, that rediscovers the wellsprings of joy and avoids the temptation of self-centredness. For “the great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and

⁴³ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

⁴⁴ Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 11: AAS 110 (2018), 1114.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*, VII, 6: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 682.

⁴⁷ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 6: AAS 105 (2013), 1021-1022

⁴⁸ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*, VII, 6: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 682-683.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 683.

the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless”.⁵⁰

To his description of “the ecstasy of work and life”, Saint Francis adds two important clarifications that remain valid for us today. The first offers a practical criterion for discerning the authenticity of this style of life, while the second concerns its deepest source. As the criterion of discernment, he states that while, on the one hand, this ecstasy entails genuine self-renunciation, on the other it does not mean fleeing from life. We should constantly remind ourselves of this, lest we risk straying from the right path. In a word, those who think they are rising to God, yet fail to love their neighbour, are deceiving both themselves and others.

Here we find the same criterion that Francis used to measure true devotion. “If you see a person who in prayer has raptures that exalt him above himself to God, and yet has no ecstasy of life, that is, he does not lead a life elevated and joined to God, above all by means of constant charity, believe me, Theotimus, all his raptures are exceedingly dubious and dangerous”. His conclusion is incisive: “Being above ourselves in prayer, but beneath ourselves in life and action, being angelic in meditation, but brutish in conversation, is a true sign that such raptures and ecstasies are nothing other than diversions and deceits of the evil spirit”.⁵¹ In essence, this is what Paul already pointed out to the Corinthians in his “hymn to charity”: “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:2-3).

For Saint Francis de Sales, then, while the Christian life is never without ecstasy, ecstasy is inauthentic apart from a truly Christian life. Indeed, life without ecstasy risks being reduced to blind obedience, a Gospel bereft of joy. On the other hand, ecstasy without life easily falls prey to the illusions and deceptions of the Evil one. The great polarities of the Christian life cannot be resolved and eliminated. If anything, each preserves the authenticity of the other. Truth, then, does not exist without justice, pleasure without responsibility, spontaneity without law, and vice versa.

As for the deepest source of this ecstasy, Saint Francis astutely traces it to the love made manifest by the incarnate Son. If indeed “love is the first act and principle of our devout or spiritual life, through which we live, feel, and are moved” and “the spiritual life is such as our affective movements are”, then it becomes clear that “a heart without affection has no love”, and that “a heart that has love is not without affection”.⁵² The source of this love that attracts the heart is the life of Jesus Christ. “Nothing sways the human heart as much as love”, and this is most evident in the fact that “Jesus Christ died for us; he gave us life through his death. We live only because he died, and died for us, as ours and in us”.⁵³

These words are profoundly moving; they reveal not only a clear and insightful understanding of the relationship between God and humanity, but also the deep bond of affection between Francis de Sales and the Lord Jesus. The ecstasy of life and action is no abstract reality, but shines forth in the charity of Christ that culminates on the cross. That love, far from mortifying our existence, makes it radiate with extraordinary brightness.

⁵⁰ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2: AAS 105 (2013), 1019-1020.

⁵¹ SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, VII, 7: ed. RAVIER-DEVOS, Paris, 1969, 685.

⁵² *Ibid.*: 684.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, VII, 8: 687, 688.

For this reason, Saint Francis de Sales could eloquently describe Calvary as “the mountain of lovers”.⁵⁴ For there and there alone, do we come to realize that “it is not possible to have life without love, or love without the death of the Redeemer. Except there, everything is either eternal death or eternal love, and the whole of Christian wisdom consists in knowing how to choose well between them”.⁵⁵ Francis could thus conclude his Treatise by appealing to a sermon of Saint Augustine on charity: “What is more steadfast than charity, not in requiting injuries, but in taking no account of them? Concerned not with passing things, but with eternity? Since it has an unshakable trust in the promises of the future life, charity can tolerate all things in this present life. It can endure whatever it must here below, because it hopes in the promises of the world to come. Truly, charity never fails. Cultivate it then, and thinking holy thoughts, bring forth fruits of justice. And if you should discover anything else in praise of charity beyond what I have said here, let it become evident in your life”.⁵⁶

All this was supremely evident in the life of the saintly Bishop of Annecy, and now, once more, it is entrusted to each of us. May the celebration of the fourth centenary of his death help us to venerate Saint Francis de Sales with devotion, and through his intercession may the Lord bestow the abundant gifts of the Spirit upon the journey of his holy and faithful People.

Rome, Saint John Lateran

28 December 2022

F R A N C I S

⁵⁴ Ibid., XII, 13: 971.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *Sermons*, 350, 3: PL 39, 1535.