

# **LEADERSHIP IN THE SALESIAN TRADITION**

*"[God] converted me from what I was for myself  
into what I was to be for [the people]"*

*- Saint Francis de Sales*

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Superior General, 1994-2006**

Leadership in the Salesian Tradition

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# **LIVE JESUS!**

## **“Leadership in the Salesian Tradition”: Eleven Years Later**

Despite its brief history, this little booklet, “Leadership in the Salesian Tradition,” has already existed in several versions. It first appeared in 1997 as a paper written for the major superiors of the Congregation of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales with the title, “To Lead is to Serve: Oblate Leadership.” A few years later the members of the International Commission on Salesian Studies (ICSS) printed an adapted version of it for a wider readership. Their desire was to provide anyone who exercises leadership within the Church with a brief portrait of the “servant leader” that Jesus modeled so beautifully for us in the gospels and that St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal imitated so well in their ministries. Since the printing of the ICSS version of this article, more and more laymen and women have begun to exercise positions of leadership within the Church in many areas, particularly on the parish level. This makes the topic of Christian leadership an even more timely one today than it was eleven years ago. For that reason and because the ICSS edition of “Leadership in the Salesian Tradition” is no longer in print, the directors of DeSales Resources and Ministries have decided to reprint it.

To introduce this new printing, I have been invited to reflect on the topic of Salesian leadership from the vantage point of eleven years later. I will do that by briefly discussing three areas of Christian leadership, all from a Salesian perspective: the Jesus-centered character of Christian leadership; the role of suffering love in Christians who lead; and the often-neglected subject of St. Jane de Chantal as leader.

### **THE JESUS-CENTERED CHARACTER OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP**

Without question, the spirituality of Francis and Jane is Jesus-centered. Their motto, “Live Jesus,” is meant to be an accurate summary of their spirituality as well as a continual challenge to those who would embrace it. If anything, I am even more convinced of this truth today than when I first wrote on this topic over a decade ago—in 1997.

One of the Scriptural passages most frequently quoted by St. Francis de Sales is Galatians 2:20: “And the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me.” He quotes that text, for instance, in Chapter 23 of the Third Part of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* in which he expresses a central tenant of his Jesus-centered spirituality: “Whoever has Jesus in his heart will soon have him in all his outward ways.” Francis understands those words quite literally. Indeed, with Jesus at its center, a changed heart will inexorably express itself in one’s outward behavior, a behavior that reproduces—according to each person’s unique temperament and particular circumstances—the spirit and style of Jesus himself. With Jesus *within*, the Christian will soon “put on Jesus” and increasingly become what St. Paul calls “another Christ.”

Everything about the one who lives Jesus will in time become colored by his example. Did Jesus lead by serving? So will they who live Jesus. Did Jesus, gentle and humble of heart, invite the best in others through the persuasive power of love alone, never through fear or force? So will they who live Jesus. Did he wash the feet of his disciples, the first leaders of his Church, thus driving home to them the limits to which God’s humble love must extend in all those who would lead others in his name? The examples could be multiplied but the bottom line will always be the same: those who live Jesus in the spirit of Francis and Jane will exercise a style and manner of leadership that is Jesus-centered in both approach and content. Thus, as we Oblates like to express it, in those who live Jesus, including leaders in the Salesian tradition, Christ will be seen “once again walking upon this earth.”

## THE PLACE OF SUFFERING LOVE IN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Maybe it’s because I am eleven years older. Perhaps it’s a consequence of 9/11 and the ongoing war on terrorism. Or maybe it’s because of the pain and humiliation of recent scandals within the Church. For whatever reason, I have become increasingly convinced that the *suffering* character of Christian love needs greater emphasis in all areas of Christian life today, including the exercise of Christian leadership.

Love is absolutely central to Salesian spirituality. Francis writes exhaustively of the love of God in his *Treatise on the Love of God*. Before his untimely death, he had planned to write two others works on love, the love of neighbor and the love of self. Nor is the *suffering* character of love lacking in Salesian spirituality. Francis concludes his *Treatise* with a celebrated chapter in which Calvary is described as the “true school of love,” while Jane sums up all of Salesian asceticism in her famous teaching on the daily “martyrdom of love.”

Still, when I wrote of leadership in the Salesian tradition eleven years ago, I did not give any special emphasis to the place of suffering love in it. Although I did describe Jesus as one who had “saved his people through a ministry of lowly service, great suffering and an ignominious death,” I did not dwell on

the implications of those words and his example for those who would lead others in the Salesian tradition. I would, however, do so today. Because it follows the crucified Lord, every aspect of Christian discipleship, including that of leadership, is a costly one. As Pope Benedict expresses it, Christian love is a searching and suffering love, a love that moves beyond inordinate self-love to a love that expresses itself in “concern and care for the other.” Following the example of Jesus, such a love “seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 6). Pope Benedict expands the notion of suffering love with his emphasis on the pierced heart of Christ and his insistence that it is in the contemplation of that pierced heart that “the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move” (12). As heraldic shield, Jane and Francis gave the Order of the Visitation the image of the wounded heart of Jesus surrounded by a crown of thorns and mounted by a cross that stands in the midst of flames. When that image is joined to that of Pope Benedict’s pierced heart of Christ, we have the image of leadership that is both Christian and Salesian.

## ST. JANE DE CHANTAL AND CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Recent work in Salesian spirituality has rightly reminded us that Salesian spirituality, though it takes its name from Francis de Sales, is in fact derived from the friendship, collaboration and teachings of both Jane and Francis. For that reason we ought to look at St. Jane de Chantal’s contribution to all things Salesian, including the topic of leadership.

Jane lived—and *led* the Visitation Order—for almost two decades after the death of Francis in 1622. She had, therefore, ample opportunity to exercise the ministry of leadership and to develop her own unique style and emphasis. What was her style and approach to the art of leading others? Did she differ from Francis in her exercise of leadership? If so, how? What nuances in this area are uniquely hers? I did not delve into those or similar questions in my earlier article on leadership. To a limited extent, however, I did try to do so in a recent article on Salesian ministry.<sup>i</sup>

To the leaders of the Visitation Order Jane encourages patience and gentleness towards all those they lead as well as towards themselves as leaders. She invites the Superiors of her Order to deal with their sisters in an affectionate, warm, gracious and motherly manner. Significantly, she insists that “this is the matchless way to win souls and it is characteristically ours.”<sup>ii</sup> Salesian leaders are to govern and lead in this manner, she writes, because “in this we imitate our gentle Savior and Master.” Further, for those who live Jesus, “love wins all.” In short, leaders in her Order are to imitate the example of the “gentle Shepherd.”

At the very beginning of their spiritual friendship in 1604, Francis strongly advised Jane to do all through love and nothing through force or fear. She was to love obedience rather than fear disobedience. She took that advice very seriously indeed. It became the underlying spirit of her leadership style as well as the foundational principle of her advice to others on the subject.

“A spoonful of honey attracts more flies than a barrelful of vinegar!” This “golden counsel” from the pen of Francis describes well Jane’s approach to and advice on Salesian leadership. The human heart is free. It must, therefore, be won over, coaxed and wooed by love alone, never by force. In light of the example of Jesus himself, the truth of this counsel must color every relationship within the scope of Christian and Salesian leadership.

In conclusion, if I were to write this article on Salesian leadership today, I would expand its Jesus-centered character. I would do so by giving particular emphasis to the leader’s imitation of Jesus’ style and manner of leading others as well as to his example of suffering love on behalf of those he served. I would also add a section on the leadership style and teaching of St. Jane de Chantal.

I hope, dear Reader, that what I have written in this Introduction will enrich and complement what you will read in this little booklet on leadership in the Salesian tradition. In whatever leadership roles you exercise in life, may you always lead others, like Jesus, through a selfless, suffering love for them and in a manner that wins their hearts and thus their whole person through gentle persuasion and humble service!

Lewis S. Fiorelli, O.S.F.S.  
Feast of Pentecost 2008

<sup>i</sup> “ ‘Winning Hearts’: Ministering in a Salesian Manner,” in Human Encounter in the Salesian Tradition (Rome: International Commission for Salesian Studies, 2007), pp. 389-408.

<sup>ii</sup> Ste. Jeanne Françoise Frémyot Chantal, *Sa Vie et ses oeuvres*, 8 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1874-79, 4:555-56). See Wendy Wright and Joseph F. Power, OSFS, *Letters of Spiritual Direction* in Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 64.

## FOREWARD

Commemorating important anniversaries in the lives of saintly people is not just a pleasant walk down memory lane. We evoke the past to understand the extent of our indebtedness and to express the depth of our gratitude to those who have helped shape our minds and our hearts. But we go backward in order to move forward, just as in walking, we cannot advance without having one leg behind. Anniversaries give us the opportunity to reflect on what the past can teach us about the present and help to guide us in the future.

The publication of this booklet on “Leadership in the Salesian Tradition,” undertaken by the International Commission for Salesian Studies of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, is intended to commemorate a twofold anniversary of the beloved saintly Bishop of Geneva, St. Francis de Sales — the 400th anniversary of his episcopal consecration on December 8, 1602, and the 125th anniversary of his being declared a Doctor of the Universal Church by Pius IX on July 19, 1877. For this reason, we have appended to Fr. Fiorelli’s instructive and insightful article and the two papal documents on this declaration.

Francis de Sales has understood the human heart and human nature as few people have because he has plunged deeply into the recesses of his own heart to mine and reflect on the great spiritual riches which the God of Gentleness has so lavishly placed there, and he has opened up his heart to establish lasting, loving and mutually enriching relationships. As we know, his struggle as a student in Paris was decisive in developing his optimistic and practical spirituality, known as “inspired common sense” (Stopp), which has captivated and engaged so many loyal hearts.

The revelation he was favored with at his episcopal ordination gave him even deeper insights into his relationship with God and his role as a pastor. It led him to understand that he was to be as available as “a fountain in the market place,” to use his expression, to satisfy the thirst of his people for goodness, beauty and love. The spirit of accessibility, gentleness, humility and compassion which marked his pastoral ministry both as a missionary in the Chablais region and as a bishop has been a source of inspiration for those who have modeled their ministry after his, not the least of whom were St. Léonie Aviat, foundress of the Oblates Sisters of St. Francis de Sales; Fr. Louis Brisson, founder of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales; and St. John Bosco, founder of the Salesians of Don

Bosco. The latter was particularly moved by this spirit in reading Jean-Pierre Camus' account of the saintly bishop's reaction to the story of a poor shepherd in one of the mountainous villages of his diocese who lost his life in trying to save one of his cows. "I said to myself," our saint reflected, "poor widows and village folk are full of goodness and piety, while we Bishops, who are placed upon the Church's heights, are cold and hard. Is there no sunshine to melt the chilliness of my heart?" Well, we know that he basked in the warming and enlightening sunshine of God's love and reflected this warmth and light in all of his personal and pastoral relations and in his writings.

These writings were not mere theological musings, but solidly grounded not only in Sacred Scripture, the Fathers and the Ancients, but also in his own personal experience, as he was quick to point out. In his Preface to the Treatise on the Love of God, he makes this clear. He sets forth in this spiritual classic "not so much the things[he] learned in earlier days of disputation, but rather ..." what he learned as a spiritual guide "and twenty-four years spent in sacred preaching." These experiences taught him that an irenic and balanced approach is what is most effective for evangelizing and furthering the mission of the Church. He considered preaching the Word of God, "when convenient and inconvenient," as St. Paul reminds us, to be one of the most important duties of a bishop. In fact, he strongly believed that preaching was the ordinary means by which we receive God's inspirations.

The recent synod of bishops grappled with the nature of authority in the Church and attempted to deepen its understanding of Vatican II's teaching on the relationship between the Pope and bishops. This is, at heart, the problem of how to exercise pastoral leadership in our world today. The influence of the saint's teaching on papal infallibility persuaded a number of the Fathers of Vatican I to define this teaching. It appears to have been a major factor in his being declared a Doctor of the Church. However, Vatican II gave a more balanced view of authority in the church, which echoed the teaching of Francis de Sales, especially in his *Controversies*, more appropriately designated as *Meditations on the Church*. In these writings, occasioned by his missionary labors, he stressed the importance of collegiality and emphasized that bishops are not "lieutenants of the Pope but of our Lord." This statement closely reflects that of *Lumen Gentium*, which states: "Bishops govern the particular churches entrusted to them as vicars and ambassadors of Christ" (No. 27).

It is with good reason that Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic letter *Sabaudiae Gemma* (The Gem of Savoy), commemorating the 400th anniversary of the saint's birth, considered St. Francis de Sales as one of the



precursors of Vatican II who “anticipated the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council with such a keen and progressive insight.” Furthermore, the Pope assures us in this same document: “He explained so clearly what the foundations of the Church are and where they are to be found that his doctrine seems quite useful for interpreting and developing the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* of the Ecumenical Council.” The prophetic insight of our saintly bishop’s teaching offers an excellent resource for further development on the nature of leadership in the Church—a work that theologians should be encouraged to undertake, especially those in the Salesian tradition.

The International Commission on Salesian Studies is grateful to Fr. Fiorelli for making available his article, which so convincingly and persuasively captures the spirit and substance of Salesian leadership — one which our modern world finds so inviting. We offer this brochure to all in the Salesian family as a source of reflection and inspiration as we celebrate the two anniversaries of our saintly patron and work together to make him better known and loved.

International Commission on Salesian Studies

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+Live Jesus

## Introduction

This article is a reflection on Christian leadership in the Salesian tradition. It begins with a look at Jesus whose leadership was one of selfless, suffering service. It then moves to a consideration of the example of St. Francis de Sales who was an outstanding imitator of Jesus. Finally, it looks at a number of qualities that are to characterize any Christian who exercises leadership within the Salesian tradition.

## Example of Jesus: To Lead Is To Serve

*"The greatest among you will be the one who serves the rest."*  
(Matthew 23:11)

*"Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest; whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all. The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve, to give his life in ransom for the many." (Mark 10:43-45)*

These brief verses from the scripture clearly indicate that Jesus expected leaders within his church to serve others just as he did. A brief development will be helpful at this point. In the Old Testament there are many titles given to the eagerly anticipated Savior. Among them are: Emmanuel, Messiah, Servant, Son of David, Priest, Prophet and King. One important pre-Christian tradition speaks of the coming One as the Messiah who, as mighty Lord, will forcibly rid Israel of its oppressors and establish Jerusalem as the spiritual and political capitol of the world. Another, markedly different, tradition speaks of the coming Savior in the language of a servant. Through suffering and death, he will save his people from their enslavement to the spiritual oppression of sin and death. This is, of course, Isaiah's "Suffering Servant". Now, before Jesus, the Jewish people would have found it impossible to imagine these two traditions as descriptive of one and the same historical figure. For nothing in their tradition had prepared them for a Messiah who would suffer!

The actual events in the life of Jesus made the unthinkable thinkable. Recognized through resurrection faith as the Messiah, Jesus had saved his people through a ministry of lowly service, great suffering and an ignominious death! Because of Jesus, one had now to speak of a suffering Messiah. Peter expresses this truth in Acts 2:36: "Therefore let the whole house of Israel know beyond any doubt that God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus whom you crucified." Of course, as the oral tradition developed, this post-resurrection insight into a suffering Messiah was read further and further back into the life and ministry of Jesus (Matt. 9:22). What does all this have to do with a Christian understanding of leadership? Jesus is not only true God; he is also true man. As such, he not only saves us; he also models for us, in the most perfect manner, what it means to be human. In the subject at hand, he models leadership for us in terms of a suffering, redemptive love which contributes to the salvation of those we serve. Jesus is always counter-cultural, but perhaps never more so than when he models leadership for us. Let us take a moment to ponder his example.

Did Jesus ever take advantage of his status as God's Son to enhance his own person, fame, or fortune? He expressed the unvarnished truth when he said that he had no place to lay his head and no home to call his own. Few were his possessions. He made use only of what was necessary to sustain his itinerant missionary efforts. Nor did he ever give a moment's thought to the furtherance of his own agenda. He preached only the Father's agenda. Never lording it over others, he served all with an unfeigned kindness, a gentle compassion, and a selfless joy. We are all familiar with John the Baptist's celebrated cry that Jesus must increase while he must decrease. That was also Jesus' sentiment towards those whom he served. For does not scripture affirm that it was our sins that he took upon himself; that it was us that he saved through a suffering ministry and a painful death? He lost his very self in a suffering life and a painful death so that we might at last find our true selves. Although examples are many, these few examples amply demonstrate that, for Jesus, the bottom line of leadership is a selfless, even suffering, service of others so that they might have life to the fullest measure possible.

On the night before his death, Jesus told his disciples who would lead his Church and whose feet he had just washed: "As I have done, so must you do" (John 13:14-15). Christian love patterns itself after that profoundly moving gesture. From that night on, Christian leadership, far from being a soft cushion which pampers and buffers, will rather be a challenge to us to minister to others in their most basic needs, both human and spiritual. In those who are Christian leaders, Christ ought to be seen, once again, kneeling before others, washing their feet. For them,

charity must be a robust virtue, which rolls up its sleeves and pitches in to do whatever needs to be done to address the need of others. From a word of comfort or challenge to the drying of a tear; from providing for the spiritual and sacramental needs of the community to the healing of a wounded heart or a bruised psyche; from preparing a meal to dressing the sores of a sick person: love will do all that. Love will do more than that. Like Christ, Christian leaders will lead others by serving them with a foot-washing love. In addition, such a love must always serve as a litmus test for authentic leadership.

## **Leadership: The Ecstasy of Loving Service**

Francis de Sales, the gentleman saint, lived Jesus perfectly. Therefore, like Jesus, he loved others by serving them. Sts. Jane de Chantal and Vincent de Paul tell us that in seeing Francis people “seemed to see our Lord upon the earth.”<sup>1</sup> The mystical experience which St. Francis de Sales enjoyed during his episcopal ordination on December 8, 1602 was a defining moment in his personal understanding of Christian leadership. That understanding still speaks powerfully to our own appreciation of Christian leadership today. Humility prevented Francis from speaking often of that experience. However, on one occasion he did confide to St. Jane, “his other self,” what had occurred: “God had taken me out of myself in order to take me to Himself, and then God gave me back to the people. That is, God converted me from what I was for myself into what I was to be for them.”<sup>2</sup> A reflection on that experience will tell us much about how leadership ought to be exercised.

God took Francis out of himself to God’s own self. Francis defines ecstasy as “merely to go out of oneself,”<sup>3</sup> that is, as the movement of love by which we go out of and above ourselves and remain there so as to be united with God.<sup>4</sup> For Francis, ecstasy is usually an experience which is common to every Christian. Thus, for him it is either the experience of union with God in prayer and sacraments, which he calls ‘affective love’ or it is the experience of a Christian who, prompted by the grace received in prayer, leaves the comfortable familiarity of his own self-absorption to go out to others in a life of humble service and vibrant charity. He terms this experience “an ecstasy of life and action,” or ‘effective love.’<sup>5</sup> In the mystical experience at his episcopal ordination, Francis was taken out of himself for union with God. Reflecting upon that experience, he was to conclude that Christian leadership begins in the alchemy of a loving and mutual relationship between God and us. Leaders begin their training for their ministry in heart to heart union with God who is both deeply personal and powerfully transforming. That ministry is always to be nourished there as well.

“Then God gave me back to the people. That is, God converted me from what I was for myself into what I was to be for them.” Union with God always transforms Christians. While “out of themselves” they are within the burning furnace of God’s loving presence. In that presence, they are gradually stripped of their old selves and former ways, and are increasingly refashioned into another Christ. More and more, they begin to live as Jesus lived, to love, as Jesus loved. Thus, through prayer, the Christian becomes, like Christ, one with the Father in both loving presence (union) and singleness of purpose (union of wills). Francis calls this unitive experience ‘affective love.’ In addition, in prayer, the Christian learns to love others as Jesus did. Francis calls this ‘effective love’ in that it carries the fruits of loving union into an ecstasy of “life and action” for others, transforming Christians from what they were for themselves into what they will now be for others.<sup>6</sup> Like Jesus and Francis, Christians leave the quiet, centered presence of God in order to bring the blessings of the Father to others. They do this in selfless service, which manifests God’s unconditional love for each of them, even by name.<sup>7</sup> This mystical experience of St. Francis de Sales speaks directly to the character of Salesian leaders. Prayer is to be for them, as it was for both Jesus and Francis, an essential precondition for the apostolic life of selfless service to others. As happened with Francis, prayer will transform religious and Christian leaders into another Christ so that, like him, they will become totally dedicated to the divine will for them and will carry the fruits of their prayer to those they serve. People will then eventually be able to say of them what St. Jane could say of St. Francis: “...how he labored for others! His zeal burned him up in the end.”<sup>8</sup>

## Traits of Salesian Leadership

An analysis of several themes from the perspective of Salesian tradition would suggest certain qualities and characteristics of religious and Christian leadership.

## Love Fashions Leadership

The *Song of Songs* captivated St. Francis de Sales and in the reciprocal love between God and each human person, he saw the only appropriate prism through which to fully grasp the mystery of God’s relationship with us. *Tenui nec dimittam* means: “I have laid hold of you and I will never let you go!” (Song 3:4) God whispers those words to each of us; we, in turn, whisper them to God. They tell of a burning love which forms out of two hearts but one heart and which fashions from two wills but one will. Effective leadership begins in the quiet familiarity of prayer-

ful union. It is nourished there, where the heart learns directly from God how much we are each loved, even by name, and where we hear God's word to us and heed God's will for us, not out of fear or force, but simply because it is our Beloved who asks it of us. Through the transforming furnace of daily prayer, we are refashioned into what he wishes to make of us, becoming increasingly the vessel of God's will among those with whom we share life. Leadership begins in the still, quiet moment of prayer, heart to heart. It frequently returns there for nourishment, strength, guidance, and support. In prayer we become pure capacity for God and, as such, truly effective channels of God's foot-washing love for others. Leaders in the Salesian tradition, then, draw strength daily from the Heart of Jesus through prayerful communion with him. Through the years they remain faithful to that Source despite the pull and tug of increasing responsibilities and ever-greater demands on both their time and their energy. Leaders know, almost instinctively, that they can only really be of service to others if they become ever more totally a vessel through whom God draws near to them. In addition, that can only happen through prayer.

## **Prayer and Leadership**

Salesian tradition emphasizes that we have to bring our students and all those who are in our care and responsibility to prayer with us. That bit of advice has a long tradition. An analysis of the Bible shows that Jesus himself prayed for his disciples: "For these I pray...for these you have given me, for they are really yours" (John 17:9). Moreover, he taught the twelve apostles to pray for those whom they served (Matthew 17:21). Prayer, then, must be a major component of Salesian leadership. I remember how struck I was while listening to the remarks which a Religious Superior made to the members of his community during the ceremony of his installation as Superior. He promised them that he would pray daily for each of them by name. That simple promise made a profound impact upon me. It reminded me that Salesian leaders exercise their ministry of loving service within the context of faith. In faith, they daily lift up all those whom they serve before the throne of a good and kind God. Such a ministry is on solid ground! We should not only look for competence, compassion, and common sense in our leaders, but also a person of prayer and commitment.

## **Living Jesus**

Through the alchemy of prayer, we are transformed into Christ. We put on the "mind of Christ," learning how to be among others as he was, as one who serves them. Christian leadership is one of service, not of

lordship and never of power. The world teaches us quite another kind of leadership where one often uses authority to dominate or to profit. Is that the example that Jesus gave us? Did he not, rather, as the Good Shepherd, spend himself in service on behalf of others, even leaving the ninety-nine in search of the only one who was lost? Upon finding the lost sheep, what was his response? He caressed it with joy, shouldered it gently, and carried it to safety.

Jesus served us, not only at the dark moment of death, but also throughout each day of life, often in small, apparently insignificant, ways. He's the one, after all, who taught that a cup of cold water given to someone who thirsts merits a crown of gold. He's the one who gave hungry people something to eat, who comforted those who were grieving, who defended those without defenses, and who befriended the lonely, the sad, the outcast and the sinner. He led them by serving them. Such leadership cannot be learned in courses on leadership training. It is, rather, a gift which God generously bestows on those who love his Son and who give of themselves to others as he did, even to the extent that he did, not only in everyday life, but even unto life itself. Jesus spent himself in serving others. So must we. From prayer, we learn to imitate him who asked us to learn of him because he is gentle and humble of heart (Matthew 11:29). Thus, in prayer we learn the two most important relational virtues for anyone who desires to live Jesus: humility and gentleness. Humility teaches us how we are to relate to God; gentleness teaches us the manner in which we are to interact with others.

Prayer teaches us two truths about Christian humility. It teaches us, first of all, that any gifts that we may possess are from our good and bountiful God. It also teaches us that it is God's desire that we use our gifts in service to others and, in that way, to glorify God as their true source. We also learn in prayer how to honor the divine image in people and to do everything in our power to bring that image to perfection in them. We teach others by word and example that the divine image is the foundation for the deep respect, even reverence, in which each person is to be held. In this way, we learn to interact gently with all others solely on the basis of their being intimately related to our tri-personal God. For each person is the image of God, a spouse of Christ, and the precious vessel of the Holy Spirit. St. Francis de Sales writes that Christians are to love others simply because all are created to God's holy image and are therefore called, like us, to share in God's grace and glory. "It is for this reason that, in seeing anyone at all, we should cry out to one another 'Stop, do you see this created being, do you see how it resembles the Creator?' Should we not cast ourselves upon him, caress him, and weep over him with love? Should we not give him a thousand, thousand blessings?"<sup>9</sup>



## **Winning Hearts**

Given what has just been said, those who exercise Salesian leadership do so in such a manner that the freedom of those they lead is fully engaged through the compelling motivation of love alone, never through fear or force. Our saint's words to St. Jane are particularly relevant both for those who lead and those who follow: "Do all through love and nothing through force." We trust that their hearts, too, are one with the Beloved and, thus, that they too want to do, freely and fully, what that Beloved asks of them through others. Faith alone makes sense of submitting the precious gift of one's freedom to the judgment call of another. It is possible only when one sees in the other, not human frailty, shortcomings, even sin, but the Beloved who has sent the Leader to us. Love is the motivation, but it is faith, which is the light by which we penetrate beyond appearances to lay hold of the Lord who speaks to us when we are called to obey. Like Jesus, leaders are to have a genuine esteem for all people in their particularity and uniqueness. Theirs is to be an unfeigned regard for them. Their sole desire is to assist them in their personal growth and to do all in their power to enable the best in each of those they serve. In acting in this manner, they are to deal with others in the way that Jesus dealt with people. Jesus never dominated others; he never judged them, nor did he place conditions on his love for them. He simply served them. Leadership of this kind affirms that each person is made to God's image and is thus endowed with a dignity and freedom which can never be forced or compelled but is only to be won over through love and respect. For that reason, even when it might be easier to govern by dictate, Salesian leaders try never to succumb to that temptation. Rather they take whatever time and patience are needed to "win the hearts" of others and to invite their freedom, taking into consideration the interests and initiatives of everyone, which they respect and co-ordinate, taking into account the use of their abilities.

## **Good Balance and Good Judgment**

Good balance, perspective and proportion are of central importance in the Salesian tradition. Therefore, leaders must take care not to give all matters equal weight but, rather, to respond in the appropriate manner to each succeeding circumstance. Jesus cried over an indifferent and sinful Jerusalem, and he was justifiably angry at the inappropriate business being conducted in God's house. On the other hand, he was quietly welcoming to a repentant sinner and knew just the right word with which to comfort a wounded heart. In other words, his response was always on target, nuanced in the appropriate manner for each particular circumstance. Since a spiritual leader is often a guide for the human spirit,

sound judgment and good balance are more important than any credential or title. St. Francis de Sales knew this and gave great weight to balance, proportion and perspective. Salesian leaders must be people whose judgment is sound and whose manner of being and acting is blessed by balance.

### ***Suaviter Et Fortiter (Gently but Firmly)***

Former American President Harry S. Truman is not remembered for his eloquence. He is remembered, however, for a forthright sign, which he placed squarely in the middle of his desk announcing that “the buck stops here!” In my view, those words speak directly to leadership. He recognized that, after all the consultation was done and all the advice was listened to, someone had to make a decision, defend the reasonableness of that decision, and see to it that it was implemented. As President, he was that someone. Decisive, strong leadership is the *fortiter* of our Salesian *suaviter et fortiter*. Still that decisiveness must be balanced by an awareness of the fact that even good decisions are not always appreciated and that each person reaches the point of acquiescence at his own pace. Thus, understanding and patience must balance decisiveness. For all that, it is often lonely at the top, and a leader must be able to be comfortable with an unpopular decision which is nevertheless the right one, standing perhaps alone with God who, for the moment at least, may be the only one who really understands and accepts it. At those moments, leadership partakes deeply of the cross. We must admit, too, that there may be times when, despite a leader’s best efforts to reach a good decision, a bad one is the result. At such times, the Salesian principle regarding the love of one’s abjection comes into play.

### **Ask For Nothing, Desire Nothing, Refuse Nothing**

In the Salesian tradition, when one has reached a state of oneness with God in both union and purpose, all personal desiring ceases. One is now content to rest in the provident arms of God, happy to be carried by him in whom one has placed all one’s trust.<sup>10</sup> Of course, once his will becomes manifest to us, the appropriate action follows immediately to accomplish fully and zealously what he expects of us.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, in all this we have no particular personal preference, at least in the high point of our spirit. We are satisfied that we belong to God and that God’s will is being done in us and through us. In a famous December 1623, letter to Dom Jean de St. François, St. Jane de Chantal testified that she never read Book 9 of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, “without seeing clearly that Francis de Sales practiced what he preached, as each occasion arose: ‘Ask

nothing, desire nothing; refuse nothing,' this excellent and little known saying of his which he himself so faithfully practiced to the very end of his life could only have come from someone completely indifferent."<sup>12</sup>

How is leadership exercised in this state of holy indifference? Leaders in the Salesian tradition do all in their power to persuade others and to "win their hearts" over to the decision reached.<sup>13</sup> They muster all their rational and rhetorical skills in order to explain the reasonableness of the action taken. Yet they know that the outcome depends largely upon the freedom and good will of the individuals toward whom it is directed. The leader is nevertheless at peace, content to surrender the result into God's provident care, neither asking for nor desiring a particular result, nor refusing to accept, even to embrace, whatever God permits to be the outcome. In this state the most profound freedom is attained. For that state parallels the state of Jesus dying on the cross. His only remaining desire was to entrust his person and his mission into the hands of his Father, whom he was content to trust. In that moment of apparently utter passivity, Jesus experienced the deepest freedom and exercised the greatest leadership, inviting those who would follow him there into God's own Kingdom.

"Asking for nothing" extends, in Salesian leadership, to the material and social "perks" (perquisites) of office as well. One aspect of leadership which is especially attractive to potential leaders in the world is that of the perks and prerogatives associated with high office: power over people, places of honor and respect at gatherings, the esteem of others. The list is endless. Though accepting gestures of respect and esteem when freely offered them by virtue of their office, Salesian leaders never actively seek them nor, more importantly, do they condition their service to others in light of them. In this, they are reminded of the saint's description of a peacock, which, when spreading its beautiful plumage, exposes its unattractive rear end. The Salesian leader is to be among others simply as one who serves, low-keyed, genuine and generous.

## **Encouraging and Empowering Others**

St. Francis de Sales recognized the gifts and talents of others and did all that he could to empower them. A good example of this is his frequent insistence that St. Jane de Chantal exercise leadership and authority among the Visitandines in her own name, following her own intuitions and insights. Her natural tendency was to defer to him and to follow his precedent. He taught her, rather, to trust her own gifts of leadership. Such a practice served her and the Order well in those long decades of growth after his untimely death and before her own. Leaders in the Sale-

sian tradition rejoice in the gifts of others and do their best to draw them forth so that they might be used, as their own are, for the betterment of others. Far from being intimidated by talented, articulate, and competent people, they make it their practice to empower them, often surrounding themselves with the best of them in order to be of greater service to the rest of those whom they serve in community, apostolate, Province, Congregation, and Church. For them, subsidiarity and collegiality are never simply echoes from a somewhat distant Council but are, rather, vital principles of governance which guide their leadership among others.

## **Hospitality and Leadership**

When I was a student in theology I was surprised to learn that one of the most important criteria for the selection of a bishop in the early church was his reputation for hospitality. Hospitality was considered an especially appropriate symbol for the welcoming and inviting love of God. In a leader, it was as valued as holiness and sound doctrine. Remember, too, the Old Testament precedent. In showing hospitality to strangers, Abraham had welcomed God himself. He and Sarah were blessed with a child because of that kindness. St. Francis de Sales followed that venerable tradition. He had a poor home and a simple table, but the stranger and the poor, as well as the affluent and powerful were always welcomed there. In fact, his servants had frequently to “run interference” for him lest the accommodating Bishop have no time at all left for himself. For Francis, hospitality included a spirit of openness and welcome to all, always. Like Jesus, he was always “a man for others” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer). Leaders in the Salesian tradition should possess an open and welcoming spirit, not only so that those they lead might feel comfortable in approaching them, but also so that all others might sense the welcoming presence of God in the person of the leader as well as in the sacred space into which they are invited.

## **Mary, Example of Leadership**

St. Francis de Sales had a strong devotion to Mary throughout his life. It was through her intercession, while he was a young student in Paris, that he weathered the only major spiritual crisis of his life. She was the model after which he patterned the spirit of the Order of the Visitation. Mary is the paradigm of what a Christian is called to be and, therefore, of what a Christian leader must strive to be. From Mary’s quiet stillness during expectant prayer, to her ready “fiat” to do whatever God willed for her; from her generous selflessness in letting her Son minister

and serve others, to her courageous willingness to stand at his side in agony and death; from her role as comforter to the discouraged and frightened disciples, to her role now as advocate for us before God; in all these ways Mary is the Christian's model. In Mary, we find a remarkable woman in whom to place our trust as well as a superb model to imitate. Most importantly, in Mary we find the example of one who went forth from prayer, in the mystery of the Visitation, to serve a cousin during a difficult pregnancy. Mary left God in prayer in order to find and serve him in a neighbor's need. In that example, she has shown what it means to lead, which is always first to serve!

## **Focusing on Individuals**

Although Jesus was sent to save the world, he never neglected the needs of the individual immediately before him. Francis de Sales ministered in that way as well. Salesian leaders are surely at their best when they attend to each individual in his or her human and spiritual hurts and needs. Thus, especially when others are in situations of crisis, whether spiritual, vocational, relational or moral, our leaders must be brothers and sisters to them, truly caring for them by spending themselves totally so as to help, comfort, sustain and give them hope. They must do all this while carefully guarding confidentiality so well that God alone will fully know the true scope of the good they do here. Nevertheless, each instance of such kindness and care is a further testimony to the goodness of the leader and to the effectiveness of his or her leadership.

## **The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life**

There is currently, in English, a best-selling book by Thomas More whose title is *The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life*. In it the author suggests countless ways in which one can find magic and experience enchantment in the midst of things which occur everywhere and everyday. As I read it, I kept thinking that this is precisely what St. Francis de Sales taught us four hundred years ago. For he taught men and women of every age and state in life how to discover the divine not only in the Sacrament of the Altar but also in the sacrament of daily interactions with spouse, family, friends, and co-workers. No task is too humble nor any event too insignificant, he reminds us, to be "filled with the grandeur of God." We need only know how to look for it there by "directing our intention" to it, knowing that God is always already there. A leader in the Salesian tradition is tireless in reminding others of the magic of each moment and of the divine possibility in every circumstance, as well as divinity itself in each person. In leading in this manner, people are brought to God who

is forever Emmanuel, “God among us, God with us.” God can be found in the nooks and crannies of everyday life! People are paying millions to discover a truth which is at the heart of our spiritual tradition!

## **The Power of Persuasion**

Salesian tradition exults in the inalienable freedom, priceless dignity, and unrepeatable uniqueness of each human person. We appreciate this as a major contribution of St. Francis de Sales who grounded his much-heralded Christian humanism in the first chapter of Genesis which reveals that each person is made to God’s own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). Thus, strong, clear, balanced and fraternal leadership is always to be exercised among all who, created in such dignity, remain their own centers of autonomy and freedom. This rightly frames Salesian leadership within the context of fraternal mutuality. Given that framework, leadership can only be successful to the extent that both leaders and those whom they hope to lead recognize that they share a common purpose and walk, arm in arm, towards the same horizon. In this context, leaders should attempt to persuade, never force, while those being led must keep themselves open and receptive. Thus Salesian leadership is a partnership which is based on a common dignity, mutual respect, a shared vision and a single purpose. The exercise of leadership under these circumstances may not be the easiest way, but it is the Salesian way. Salesian leaders never treat others as objects upon whom they act arbitrarily, but always as free subjects whose gifts and talents they genuinely esteem and seek in every way to actualize. In exercising leadership, they always take into consideration the interests and initiatives of everyone, which they respect and co-ordinate, taking into account the use of their abilities. This is also why, on every level, a leader in the Salesian tradition must be guided by the principle of subsidiarity

## **Encouraging and Cultivating the Interior Life**

By nature we are bound to God. We recognize that we have been created for the one purpose of union with God. Followers of St. Francis de Sales begin the realization of this goal from deep within the heart. Francis reminded Philothea that if the name of Jesus is planted upon her heart, he will soon be manifested in all her exterior actions and in her every relationship. Thus, he begins her progress towards the devout life by teaching her how to make Jesus live deep within her own heart. He tells her that he “cannot approve the method of those who try to reform someone by beginning with outward things. We ought to begin inside...Since the heart is the source of our actions, as the heart is so are they.... Whoever has Jesus Christ in his heart will soon have him in all outward ways.”<sup>14</sup>

In a 1604 letter, several years before the publication of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Francis expressed this same thought in this manner: “Our souls should give birth, not outside themselves, but within, to the dearest, most charming and handsome male child that one could wish for. It is Jesus whom we must form and bring to birth in ourselves.”<sup>15</sup> If, in our lives and actions, Jesus is to be seen walking once again upon the earth, then we must begin by making room for him within our hearts.

The encouragement and cultivation of the life of interiority within each community and every religious are a principal part and great responsibility of the Salesian leadership. Nor can other pressing issues serve as an excuse to neglect this “one thing necessary.” It is true that it is a personal responsibility for nourishing and developing one’s own interior life. The leader should lead by encouraging the interior life of all, with regard to daily prayer, both communal and personal, interviews and discussions with the spiritual director, and the observances and devotional practices such as devotion to the Sacred Heart on the First Fridays, annual retreats, Rosary, spiritual readings, etc. For in the state of spiritual bankruptcy, ministry is frequently reduced to just more work and religious life often becomes simply a matter of appearance without substance. Spiritual leadership is especially essential here!

## **Apostolic Activity is Guided by God’s Love**

Religious leaders are sent daily from prayer into the vineyard to participate in the Church’s mission. In a world made callous by violence and disrespect for the individual, the Salesian spirit of gentleness and respect for others is like a healing balm, a tonic for wholeness. In an age of undiluted pride and rampant arrogance, humility as modeled for us by Jesus is greatly needed as a counter-cultural corrective. In a society whose great spiritual poverty nevertheless hungers for holiness and wholeness, the powerful simplicity of Salesian spirituality awaits them. Spiritual leaders are challenged to cultivate those gifts among us and, with tireless energy, to encourage their dissemination in the world we serve, a world which remains deeply impoverished without them but wondrously enriched by them.

Leaders will naturally be tempted to give their attention to the concrete challenges immediately before them in terms of assignments, finances, troubleshooting, and the like. They are wise, however, and serve us better in the long run, if they remain focused on “the one thing necessary,” that is, if they remind us frequently of our vision; and turn our heads, hearts, energies and talents to the spirit which not only gives meaning to our personal lives but is a powerful blessing for our world. Although there are many missionary institutes, apostolic men and women

are engaged in pastoral ministry of every kind throughout the world, Salesian leaders are called to live and spread the spirit of the gentle Bishop of Geneva who so perfectly lived Jesus and who so attractively made his Good News come alive in people of every temperament and in all walks of life. In this area especially, leaders must keep the forest clearly in sight even while they carefully attend to the needs of the particular trees. Such leadership is never easy. It is, however, utterly essential. Without it, apostolic effort becomes simply more work; clarity in charism becomes hopelessly muddled; and a well-defined direction in mission becomes just so much energy widely diffused and largely dissipated.

While addressing the needs of the Church in today's world, Salesian leaders ought also to provide ample opportunity as well as an appropriate atmosphere to enjoy quality time for the serious cultivation of the interior life. Responsible leadership will take the steps that insure the successful integration of all the various dimensions of the spiritual life. Above all, Salesian leadership will keep in mind that whatever the form of the apostolate, we are guided by our love for God and his people. To communicate this love is the supreme goal of our apostolic activity. Thus, Francis de Sales' life will be the pattern of our ministry as we wholeheartedly embrace his great enthusiasm for the spiritual empowerment of those we serve. Humble recognition of their human frailty is an important factor of Salesian leadership. If their condition of frailty and weakness, perhaps even sin, were so clear to themselves, how much more would it be to others before whom they were supposed to speak? What helped me to proceed despite those reservations was the conviction that God seems to prefer "earthen vessels" so as to make it abundantly clear to all including the vessel, that the precious liquid being dispensed is the result of God's grace alone, not human achievement. Besides, if we waited until we were perfect, who would ever preach or teach anything at all? Neither the humbling awareness of one's spiritual or personal inadequacy, nor the tangible fear of playing the prophet among those with whom we live ought to prevent us from exercising the responsibility of spiritual leaders.

## **Personal Contact and Relationships**

In the Salesian heritage, there is no substitute for personal contact and relationships. St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal left the Church a wonderful spiritual tradition that continues to speak powerfully to our world today. They made a enduring impact on countless people and even on society itself. These lasting accomplishments were grounded on the solid rock of one of the most celebrated spiritual friendships in the history of the Church. They were collaborative efforts between people who



cared for each other, who shared a common goal, who worked co-operatively with each another, and who labored so that each of them would be the best that they could be and become the saint which God desired them to become.<sup>16</sup> Their example of friendship and spiritual accomplishment is the desired goal of Salesian tradition. The Church is one body, made up of many members. The body is healthy and whole only when all of its members function in a fully integrated manner, each part supporting and assisting the others in the pursuit of a common purpose. The “heart and soul” of the body is obviously vital to each of the parts. However, without the full and healthy co-operation of those parts, it will not be able to carry out the spirit of the Salesian tradition of leadership. Happily the opposite is also true: when head, heart, soul, and members work as one, God’s will is accomplished and the world is well served by all who bring it the gentle and inviting spirit of St. Francis de Sales!

## Conclusion

As Christians, we lead in the spirit of Jesus following his example. As religious leaders, we look to St. Francis de Sales for spiritual guidance in this important ministry. Jesus led by serving others in a selfless, suffering ministry, which, while bringing salvation to the whole world, also touched each individual in his particular need. His example forever describes the parameters within which Christians lead others. St. Francis de Sales links prayer intimately to daily life as a tree to the fruit it produces. Thus, in the area of Christian leadership, prayerful communion with God leads to a grace filled ministry of service to others. Communion with God also insures that the exercise of Christian leadership will always be within the context of mutual charity and a shared faith. In that context, those who lead will “put on the mind of Christ” and will imitate his unforgettable example of kneeling before others in humility and love while washing their feet. Those who follow will do so also by living Jesus and by imitating his manner of leading others by serving them.

Followers of St. Francis de Sales are called to respect the dignity of others as God’s own image. For that reason, persuasion, never force, remains the operative characteristics in all their dealings with others, especially in the exercise of their leadership. They attempt to win hearts through the persuasive power of love alone, fully aware that only the common bond of shared faith can wed obedience to freedom. This is the example of Jesus himself, as well as his gift to those who follow him. For Jesus was the most obedient person; he was, at the same time, the most free person. Among Christians, leadership is never tyranny nor is obedience ever subservience. Both are, rather, expressions of love. Therefore, followers of St. Francis de Sales are called to know that to lead is

really a commitment to serve and that to obey, as Jesus did, is truly an invitation to freedom.

1 *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal*, trans. by Elisabeth Stopp, Hyattsville, MD: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967, p. 172.

2 André Ravier, S.J., *Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint*, trans. by Joseph D. Bowler, OSFS, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1988, p. 115.

3 St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. by John K. Ryan, Rockford, TAN Books, 1974, Book 1, chapter 10.

4 *Ibid.*, Book 6, Chapter 6.

5 *Ibid.*, Book 7, chapter 8.

6 *Ibid.*, Books 6 to 9. They deal with prayer (affective love) and union with God's "two wills" (effective love).

7 *Ibid.*, Book 12, chapter 12.

8 *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal*, p. 172.

9 *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book 10, Chapter 11

10 *Ibid.*, Book 9.

11 *Ibid.*, Book 9, chapter 6.

12 St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal, p. 168.

13 St. Jane de Chantal advised her Superiors to 'win the hearts' of their sisters in community. See, for example, *Sa Vie et ses oeuvres*, VIII, 542: Letter MDCCLXIV. *Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, trans. by Peronne Marie Thibut, VHM, with introductions by Joseph Power, OSFS, and Wendy Wright, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, p. 265.

14 St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. by John K. Rayan, Garden City, New Jersey, Doubleday, 1966, Part III, chapter 23.

15 *Oeuvres*, Vol. XII, 282-288. *Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*, p. 129.

16 *Oeuvres*, vol. 13, p. 53-54.



## Decree “Urbis et Orbis”<sup>1</sup>

Clement the VIII seemed to foretell what a great adornment to the Church and great resource for the entire assembly of the faithful Saint Francis de Sales would be not only because of his apostolic zeal, example of virtue, and extremely gratifying way of life, but also for his knowledge and his writings filled with divinely inspired teaching. When he heard the sample of teaching which de Sales had given in his (the Pontiff's) presence when he was being promoted to the rank of Bishop, the Holy Father used these words of Proverbs to congratulate him: “Go, my son, and drink the water from your cistern and the rivers of your well; let your fountains flow far abroad, and distribute your waters in the streets.” When inviting all men to abide by the precepts of the gospel, Christ had proclaimed: “my yoke is sweet and my burden light.” With that charity and wealth of teaching, which was one of his great strengths, adapting this divine proclamation for the use of mankind, Saint Francis explained the path and plan of Christian perfection so clearly in many and varied treatises that he was able to show it to be easy and accessible to Christians in every walk of life. These treatises of Francis, written in an attractive style and with such gentle love, have produced abundant fruit throughout the devout Christian community, especially *Philothea*, Francis' spiritual letters, and the outstanding and incomparable *Treatise on the Love of God*, books carried about in the hands of all and read by increasing numbers. The admirable teaching of De Sales shines forth not only in mystical theology, but also in his apt and lucid explanations of obscure passages in Sacred Scripture. He provided this last mentioned service both in his explanations of the Canticle of Solomon and, as the occasion presented itself, again and again in his conferences and sermons. Consequently, he has been credited with restoring the dignity of sacred eloquence, compromised by the evil of the times, to its pristine splendor and with recalling traces and images of the Holy Fathers of the Church.

A great number of this holy Genevan Bishop's homilies, treatises, discourses and letters witness to his distinguished teaching in dogmatic disciplines and his unmatched skill in debating, especially when he was refuting the errors of the Calvinists. This is more than evident from the large number of heretics whom he restored to the bosom of the Catholic Church by his writings and eloquence. Certainly, in the “Conclusions” or

*Controversies*, written by this holy Bishop, a wonderful grasp of theology, a skillful way of teaching, and an inescapable force of argument clearly shine forth both in refuting heresies and in proving Catholic truth and especially in asserting the authority of the Roman Pontiff, his primacy of jurisdiction, and his infallibility, which Saint Francis so knowledgeably and excellently defended that he has been justifiably credited with anticipating the decrees of the Vatican Synod itself.

Accordingly, the holy Archbishops and Eminent Fathers, in the judgments they rendered in the consistorial meeting for the canonization of this Holy Bishop, lavished great praise not only on his holiness of life, but especially on the excellence of his teaching, saying that Francis de Sales was truly the evangelical salt brought forth to leaven the earth and to purify it of the decay of Calvinism. They further called him the sun of the earth who enlightened those lying in the darkness of heresy with the splendor of truth, applying to him this saying: "One who has taught mankind so well shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Moreover, Pope Alexander VII, of holy memory, did not hesitate to declare Francis de Sales a celebrated teacher and a remedy and bulwark against heresy for our times. Alexander said we should thank God that He had given us a new mediator for the Church to promote the growth of the Catholic faith and to convert and light the way for heretics who had strayed from the path of salvation, since Francis, imitating the example of the Holy Fathers, took care most ably to preserve the orthodoxy of the Catholic religion by strengthening morality, by overturning the teachings of heretics, and by returning misled sheep to the fold. This same Supreme Pontiff reaffirmed with great admiration what he had previously said in his consistorial remarks concerning the very distinguished teaching of De Sales, writing to the Sisters of the Visitation of Annecy: "a salutary light, by which the exceptional virtue and wisdom of the divinely inspired Francis de Sales has been poured out upon every corner of the Christian world."

Clement IX agreeing with the opinion of his predecessor, approved this antiphon to be used by the Sisters of the Visitation: "The Lord filled Saint Francis with the Spirit of understanding, and Francis supplied an abundance of teaching for the people of God." Benedict XIV also agreed with these judgments made by the most Holy Pontiffs. He often relied upon the authority of the holy Bishop of Geneva for solutions and answers to difficult questions and in his constitution *Pastoralis Curae* he referred to him as "most wise." Therefore, these words of Ecclesiasticus are fulfilled in Saint Francis de Sales: "Many shall praise his wisdom and he shall not be forgotten forever, nor will his memory be lost; his name will be sought from generation to generation; the people will tell of his wisdom, and the assembly will proclaim his praise."

Therefore, the Fathers of the Vatican Council with earnest and suppliant prayers have joined together in asking the Supreme Pontiff Pius IX that he honor Saint Francis de Sales with the title of Doctor. The most Eminent Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church and many Archbishops throughout the world have repeated these same requests, as have many colleges of Canons, Doctors of the great schools (*Lycaeorum*), and academies of learning (*Scientiarum*), and, in addition, the entreaties of distinguished kings, noble princes, and a large multitude of the faithful. Upon receiving with pleasure so many and such significant requests, His Holiness remanded, as is customary, this most important matter to the Congregation for Sacred Rites for consideration. The most Eminent and Reverend Fathers, Cardinals, charged with protecting the Sacred Rites, in a regular meeting held at the Vatican offices on the day noted below, after they listened to the report of his Eminence Cardinal Aloysius Bilio, Bishop of the Sabine region, Prefect of this same Sacred Congregation, and Positor of the cause, and, after having carefully considered the remarks of R.P.D. Laurentius Salvatus, Promoter of the Holy Faith, as well as the responses of the Promoter of the Cause, following a very thorough discussion, unanimously decreed that this rescript be issued: "We recommend that Your Holiness grant, declare, and extend to the entire church the title of Doctor in honor of Saint Francis de Sales together with the Office and Mass from the Common of Pontifical Doctors, with a proper oration and lessons of the second nocturn." July 7, 1877. After a thorough and accurate report of these matters had been made to our most Holy Lord Pope Pius IX by the undersigned secretary of the Sacred Congregation, His Holiness approved and ratified the Sacred Congregation's rescript, and in addition ordered that a General Decree be released Urbis et Orbis. On the nineteenth day of the same month and year.

**A.EP.SABINEN.CARD.BILIO S.R.C.PRAEFECTUS.  
PLACIDUS RALLI S.R.C.SECRETARIUS**

(Seal)

1 This decree was the first declaration of Saint Francis de Sales as a Doctor of the Church. Responding to new entreaties, the Holy Father Pope Pius IX made a more solemn declaration by the decree *Dives in Misericordia Deus* (The All Merciful God).



**Decree of Pius IX "*Dives in misericordia Deus*"  
16 November 1877**

**APOSTOLIC LETTER OF HIS HOLINESSS PIUS IX  
TO THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH  
PROCLAIMING ST. FRANCIS DE SALES A DOCTOR  
OF THE CHURCH**

The all merciful God who has never failed his Church in its struggles with this world and who wisely provides timely help when various vicissitudes arise, although in the 16th century because of his displeasure he punished Christian people and permitted many provinces of Europe to be overcome by the darkness of heresies raging far and wide, unwilling to reject his own people he prudently raised up new and holy luminaries by whose excellence distinguished sons of the church were strengthened in the truth and the heretics themselves were gently restored to a love of the truth. Among these distinguished men Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, exemplar of renowned holiness and teacher of true and pious doctrine stood out. Both through his words and his writings, which will endure for all time, he struck down the sinister errors rising up at the time; he defended the faith; he put vice to flight; he improved standards of moral behavior, and he showed all that heaven was accessible. Because of his extraordinary wisdom he earned the same praise which our predecessor, Boniface VIII, of Holy Memory, declared to have distinguished those most excellent doctors of the early church, who "enlightened the church through their salutary writings, embellished it with virtue, and shaped its moral life," and whom Boniface described as "luminous and shining lights placed on a light-stand in the house of God, putting to flight the darkness of error, like a morning star lighting up the body of the entire church, unlocking the secrets of scripture, and with profound and beautiful sermons enlightening the edifice of the church as with verdant blossoms." The extraordinary reputation of



Francis de Sales and the singular excellence of the writings he has left us prove and demonstrate conclusively that this statement of Boniface VIII was applicable to the Bishop of Geneva during his life time and is especially applicable after his death.

The teaching of Francis was held in such high regard in his lifetime that our predecessor of Happy Memory, Clement VIII, chose him alone – the Bishop of Geneva – from among a large number of worthy defenders of Catholic truth who flourished at that time to approach Theodore Beza, the most zealous proponent of the Calvinist plague and to deal with him one-on-one so that once this sheep (Beza) had been returned to the fold of Christ, many others might be brought back as well. Francis accomplished this task so well - and not without danger to his life – that the heretic Beza was deservedly reduced to silence and confessed the truth, although, because of his wickedness, in the hidden judgment of God, he was clearly unworthy to be returned to the bosom of the Church. Our holy Bishop enjoyed such great esteem in later years that Paul V, our predecessor of happy memory, when the famous dispute “*de Auxiliis*” was being argued in Rome, sought out the opinion of this holy Prelate and, having found himself in agreement with it, declared that this very subtle, very dangerous, long and bitterly disputed issue was settled and imposed silence on upon all parties to the debate. Indeed, if the letters he wrote to many different persons are taken into consideration, it becomes clear to all that Francis, like the most influential of the ancient Fathers of the Church, was often asked for advice by many about matters relating to explaining the Catholic faith, defending it, and to clearing up questions concerning it, and to conforming one’s life to a Christian way of living. It is also well known that, because of his learned and thorough study of many issues, Francis was held in such high esteem by Popes, monarchs, judges, and the priests who worked with him in his ministry that through his zeal, exhortations, and advice; strategies were often developed by which entire regions were purged of the plague of heresy, Catholic worship was restored, and religion was enhanced.

This reputation for excellent teaching was not diminished after Francis’ death, but was in fact greatly increased. Distinguished individuals from every rank and the Popes themselves praised Francis extraordinary knowledge most lavishly. Indeed Pope Alexander VII, of holy memory, in the Bull of Canonization (May 19, 1665) declared Francis de Sales renowned for his teaching, admired for his sanctity and a remedy and bulwark for his times against heresy. He further asserted that the hearts of peoples and noble individuals nourished by Francis’ writings brought forth a rich harvest of evangelical life. And so, in the instruction which Alexander gave in the Consistory before the canonization, he concluded that de Sales had done great good for the Church by teaching all men

through the word of his sound doctrine and by the example of his blameless life and that his influential role had survived to the present day “because of his counsels and evangelical teachings placed in the hands of the faithful through his books, which are read so assiduously.” These sentiments are similar to those expressed in a letter he sent to the sisters of the Visitation Monastery in Annecy on July 27, 1666, in which he said that the virtue and wisdom of de Sales had permeated the entire Christian world and that he so admired Francis’ extraordinary merits and divinely inspired doctrine that he had chosen to follow him (Francis) “as the special leader and guide of (my) life.”

Our predecessor Clement IX, of holy memory, regarded Francis’ teaching to be of such value that, before he was Pope, he said that de Sales, through his celebrated writings, had fashioned a kind of holy arsenal for the benefit of souls and, after he became Pope, he approved this antiphon in Francis’ honor: “Our Lord filled Saint Francis with the Spirit of understanding, and Francis supplied an abundance of teaching for God’s people.” Benedict XIV, of holy memory, in agreement with his predecessors, hastened to affirm that the works of the Genevan Prelate had been written with a divinely acquired knowledge. Relying on the authority of Francis, he resolved many difficult questions and called Francis “the wisest guide of souls” (Const. “*Pastoralis Curae*” July 28, 1741). And so it is not surprising that many persons eminent both for their brilliance and their teaching—academicians, superb speakers, judges, distinguished theologians, and even princes and monarchs themselves—have to this day proclaimed Francis to be a great and most learned man; and that many have followed Francis as their teacher and guide and have drawn much in their own writings from his.

This universally held opinion of the excellence of De Sales’ wisdom arises from the quality of his teaching which, because of his holiness, so exceeds the norm that it is judged to be fitting for a Doctor of the Church and impels us to acknowledge that this man should be counted among the most distinguished teachers Christ our Lord has given to his spouse, the Church. Although it was their very antiquity which made the holy Doctors who flourished in the earliest days of the church worthy of serious consideration as well as the embellishment of the Latin and Greek languages in which they published their books, both these things very important and indeed necessary (as we have already indicated) to their teaching so that it would appear to be communicated in an extraordinary way, of heavenly inspiration, and invested with an abundance of varied arguments as if with brilliant jewels, so that it might penetrate the entire body of the church with a new light and be a source of salvation for the faithful. These laudatory pronouncements are especially fitting for the writings of the Bishop of Geneva. For whether one considers his

writings on ascetical matters for the pious and holy conduct of Christian life, those which defended the faith, those which refuted heretics, or those having to do with the preaching of the divine word, everyone sees what great benefits flowed to the Catholic people through this holiest of men.

With learning, subtlety and clarity he composed the outstanding and incomparable twelve-book *Treatise on the Love of God*, a work which has as many admirers of the author's gentleness as it has readers. In another work called *Philothea*, he described virtue in vivid colors. Making the crooked paths straight and rough ways smooth, he showed all Christians that the path to virtue was so easy that thereafter true piety shone its light everywhere and gained entrance to the thrones of kings, the tents of generals, the courts of judges, custom houses, workshops, and even the villages of herdsmen. Indeed through his writings, he draws out from sacred doctrine the loftiest principles of the charism of sanctity and explains it so clearly that it seems to be his special gift to know how wisely and gently to apply this charism to all the conditions of the faithful. In addition, we have the tracts in which he teaches about devotion and piety, especially the Constitutions which he wrote for the Sisters of the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary founded by him. These are notable for their wisdom, discernment, and gentleness.

The letters he wrote to many different persons provide a very fertile field for the teaching of spirituality. What is especially admirable is that in these letters Francis, filled with the Spirit of God and like the author of gentleness himself, sowed the seeds of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. We regard this devotion with the greatest spiritual joy because, spread far and wide in these difficult times of ours, it has miraculously brought about a large growth in piety. Nor should we overlook that, in Francis' studies and especially in his interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles, many scriptural mysteries concerning moral and spiritual questions were solved; many problems were explained, and many obscure points were exposed to new light. From this it is fair to conclude that God, with an abundance of heavenly grace, enlightened the understanding of this holy man so that he might interpret the scriptures and make them understandable for both the learned and the unlearned.

To weaken the obstinacy of the heretics of his day and to strengthen Catholics in their faith, he also wrote, no less fortuitously, his book of Controversies containing a complete description of the Catholic faith as well as other treatises and discourses on the truths of the faith, including *L'Étendard de la sainte croix* (The Standard of the Holy Cross). In these works he fought so vigorously on behalf of the Church that he returned countless number of souls to the Church's bosom and restored the faith far and wide throughout the entire region of the Chablais.

It is of special importance that he defended the authority of this Holy See and of our successor the Roman Pontiff Blessed Peter and explained the power and nature of the papacy itself with such clarity that he actually anticipated the decrees of the Vatican Ecumenical Council [Vatican I]. Certainly his ideas concerning the infallibility of the Roman Pontiff contained in the fortieth discourse of his *Controversies*, an original copy of which was discovered while this matter was being treated in the Council, are of such a nature that they led, as if by the hand, a number of Council Fathers who were uncertain about infallibility up to that point to ultimately issue the decree regarding it. The approach which he used in preaching the divine word arose from the holy Prelate's great love for the Church and his zeal for defending it. This was true whether his purpose in preaching was to educate the Christian faithful in the fundamentals of the faith, to shape the thinking of the more learned, or to lead all the faithful to the peak of perfection. Recognizing his obligation to both the wise and the unwise and, having made himself the servant of all, he took care to teach the rustic and uneducated with simple language, while, when dealing with the more sophisticated, he dispensed wisdom in more sophisticated terms. Through his teaching he handed down the most insightful maxims and was successful in restoring the dignity of sacred eloquence damaged by the evil of the times to the ancient splendor exemplified by the Holy Fathers; learned speakers emerged from this school and abundant benefits redounded to the entire church because of them. And so Francis is regarded by all as both restorer and teacher of sacred eloquence.

And, lastly, his divinely inspired teaching, like a river of living water refreshing the field of the Church, was so useful in obtaining salvation for the people of God that the seemingly prophetic words of the proverb, which our predecessor Clement VIII, of holy memory, said to de Sales when he was being elevated to the episcopacy, appear to be very true indeed: "Go, my son, and drink the water from your cistern and the rivers of your well; let your fountains flow far abroad, and distribute your waters in the streets." Joyfully drawing on these salutary waters, the faithful have greatly admired the eminent knowledge of the Bishop of Geneva and to the present day deemed him worthy of the role of teacher of the Church. Moved by these considerations, many Fathers of the Vatican Council have asked us with earnest pleadings and unanimous voice to honor Saint Francis de Sales with the title of Doctor. The Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church and many Archbishops worldwide have repeated this same wish. Many groups of Canons, Doctors of the Academy of the Lycaeans, distinguished civic leaders, leading nobles, and, finally a large number of faithful have come to us with their own similar requests.

Consequently, very willing to comply with so many and such great entreaties, we referred this important matter for further examination, as is customary, to the Congregation of our venerable brothers the Roman Cardinals of the Holy Church charged with preserving our sacred traditions for further examination. The aforesaid Congregation of our venerable brothers in a regular meeting held on July 7 of the current year at our Vatican office, after they had heard the report of our venerable brother Cardinal Aloysius Bilio, the Bishop of the Sabine region, at the time the Prefect of this same Sacred Congregation as well as Positor of the cause, and after having carefully considered the observations of Laurentius Salvatus, Promoter of the holy faith, and the responses of the Promoter of the cause as well, and following a most thorough examination, decreed by unanimous consent that the following reply should be given: "We advise your Holiness to approve, declare and extend to the entire Church the title of Doctor in honor of Saint Francis de Sales together with the Office and Mass of the common of Doctors with a proper oration and readings of the second nocturn." We approved this rescript by publishing a general Decree "*Urbis et Orbis*" on July 19 of the same year.

New requests were made that some addition be made both in the Roman Martyrology and in the sixth lesson on the feast of Saint Francis de Sales and that all the directives given in this matter be confirmed in our apostolic letters in the form of a decree. The Congregation of our venerable brothers, the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, in a regular meeting held on the fifteenth of September of the same year handed down a rescript that "the Holy Father should be requested to issue the decree." They also decreed that there should be added to the statement about Francis in the Roman Martyrology after the words "*Annesium translatum fuit*" these words: "whom Pius IX in consultation with the Congregation of Sacred Rites has declared a Doctor of the Universal Church," and that in the sixth lesson after the words "*Vigesima nona Januarii*" the following should be added: "and he was declared a Doctor of the Universal Church by his Holiness Pius IX in consultation with the Congregation of Sacred Rites." We ratified this rescript from the distinguished Congregation on the twentieth day of the same month and year, and we ordered that Apostolic Letters be published concerning all the actions taken in this matter. This being the case, in keeping with the wishes of the aforesaid Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, Archbishops, Canons, academicians and the faithful, and in consultation with the distinguished Congregation of our venerable brother Cardinals of the Holy Roman Catholic Church charged with regulating the Sacred Rites, by our apostolic authority, and through this document, we approve the title of Doctor to honor Saint Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva and Founder of the Institute of the Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary, and,

to the extent necessary, again grant and order that he shall forever hold the title of Doctor in the Universal Catholic Church and that on his annual feast day clerics secular and regular shall celebrate the Office and the Mass according to the aforementioned decree of the Congregation of Sacred Rites. Moreover we order that the books, commentaries, and all the works of this Doctor of the Church, be cited, introduced, and used both privately and publicly in schools, academies, colleges, lectures, disputations, interpretations, assemblies, other ecclesiastical studies, and all Christian activities as the case requires.

To add incentives to the pious of the faithful in reverencing the feast day of this Doctor of the Church and imploring his help, relying upon the mercy of the omnipotent God and the authority of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul, we grant to all and every Christian of both sexes who on the feast of this holy Doctor or on one of the seven consecutive days immediately following, the choice being left to the discretion of each individual Christian, having repented, and confessed their sins, received the Holy Eucharist, and visited one of the churches of the order of the Sisters of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary with devotion and there prayed for peace among Christian Princes, the eradication of heresies, the conversion of sinners, and the exaltation of Holy Mother Church, a plenary indulgence and remission of all their sins mercifully in the Lord.

Wherefore, by this document, we direct all of our venerable brother Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and beloved sons and Prelates of other churches established throughout the world to see to it that the directives given above be solemnly published in their provinces, states, churches, and dioceses, and that they be without exception and forever observed by all both secular, ecclesiastics and religious of whatever order in every nation and place. We order and direct this — any apostolic, ecumenical, provincial, synodal, general or special constitutions and decrees and any other directives to the contrary notwithstanding. We wish that the copies or prints taken from this original be signed by a notary public and sanctioned by the seal of the person in our ecclesiastical hierarchy charged with this responsibility so that the same authority will be attached to them as would be attached to this original if it were shown or exhibited.

Given in Rome at Saint Peter's under the seal-ring of the Fisherman on the sixteenth day of November 1877 in the thirty-second year of our Pontificate.

F. Card. Asquinius

## **Artwork**

All photographs were taken by Fr. Robert McGilvray, OSFS, of De-Sales University, and depict the episcopal consecration of St. Francis de Sales.

Cover: Stained glass window in the Basilica of St. Francis de Sales, Annecy, France.

Page 8: Bas relief, Annecy Hall Chapel, Childs, Maryland, USA

Page 25: Painting in the church of St. Maurice, Thoren, France, the church where st. Francis de Sales was baptised and consecrated a bishop.

Page 29: Mosaic in the church of St. Maurice, Thoren, France.

