

### **St Francis de Sales:**

"Men accomplish more by love and charity than by severity and rigor."

Francis de Sales was born in 1567, in the thick of the reforming activity of the Church. The Council of Trent had completed its work a few years earlier. Pius V had just come to the papacy, Teresa of Avila was initiating her work of founding houses of Discalced Carmelites, and Charles Borromeo was beginning his great reforming effort in the diocese of Milan. The Jesuits had been in operation for some twenty-five years, the Theatines for nearly twice that time, the reformed Franciscan order of the Capuchins was spreading rapidly, and Philip Neri was working his magic in Rome where the Oratory was in its formative stages. All these reform initiatives would play a role in the development of Francis de Sales's ministry and spirituality.

It can sometimes be forgotten that the most authentic work of the Church in any age, her most characteristic as well as her most impressive expression, is not to be sought in the books inspired by her teaching, or in the art and architecture and music she brings forth, or in the societies and organizations she founds, or in the political and social action she engenders. All these works, and many more besides, are among the genuine fruits of the Church's life. But more central than them all, and sustaining all the many outgrowths of the life of faith, is the Church's most profound expression: the formation of a distinctive human character. The various facets of the Church's life find their most complete integration in the human shape of those under her influence. Francis de Sales is an apt example of this kind of human and spiritual formation at work. He is the finest flower of the Catholic Reformation. If the question were asked what the Catholic Reformation accomplished, among many good answers an important response would be: it produced a Francis de Sales - it engendered and brought to maturity an outstanding form of sanctity. Francis was an accomplished and well-rounded Christian humanist scholar like Thomas More; he was an intrepid and tireless missionary like Francis Xavier; he was an indefatigable reforming bishop like Charles Borromeo; he was a spiritual director and mystical teacher like John of the Cross.

Like Ignatius Loyola and Teresa of Avila he was founder of a religious order; like Philip Neri he radiated the attractive force of Christ among a circle of joyful friends and pioneered a spirituality explicitly aimed at the laity. These resemblances between de Sales and the Catholic reformers who preceded him were not accidental: he knew their histories, he nurtured himself on their writings, and he purposely set himself to imitate their holiness. In the person of Francis de Sales, all these reforming currents, so varied in their expression, were revealed as

possessing an inner unity, one that would provide the basis for a renewed Catholic faith and a regenerated Catholic culture. Here again it can be said that the key to understanding the Church's life and mission is to be found in the lives and the personalities of the saints.

**Francis Determines His Vocation:** Francis was born in the Chateau of Sales, in what was then the Duchy of Savoy, a region that straddled the Alps where what is now the French province of Savoie and the Italian region of Piemonte. He was the eldest of thirteen children in a family whose traditions were both strongly Catholic and oriented to public service. His father had been a military man until he married late in life, and he expected his eldest son to pursue a path that would lead him to a position of influence in the duchy and to the furthering of the family name and traditions. As Francis grew into young manhood, he seemed made for the part. He was graced with intelligence, poise, a good appearance, and the ability to please and befriend, while commanding respect from those around him. He was practiced in the ways of the perfect renaissance gentleman, the kind of man described in Castiglione's famous work, *The Courtier*. To this he added an affectionate temper, a deep faith imbibed especially from his young mother, a strong streak of native courage, and an iron will. He was that rare person whom everyone liked and admired and whom no one resented for being so well liked and admired.

At the age of fifteen, Francis went to Paris to study with the Jesuits at Clermont College. The Jesuits had been establishing colleges throughout Europe as they continued to hone their Christian humanist educational project, soon to be standardized in the *Ratio Studiorum*, a landmark of educational thinking and practice. It shows something of Francis's early seriousness about his faith and also his calm strength of mind that he was willing to wrestle with his father over the choice of the college. It was Francis who so wanted to study with the Jesuits; his father had originally intended a different and less devout school for him. This difference of opinion was the first round in a long bout between father and son. Francis was just the son to make a father proud: affectionate and dutiful, accomplished in all the qualities of a young nobleman, loyal to his family, and ready to obey and please his father in all things—until the question of the service of God was at stake. Then Francis would become quietly, gently, respectfully intransigent.

Francis found his new Parisian environment stimulating, and his studies with the Jesuits congenial. He gained from them an excellent education in the humanities, by which his natural intelligence was brought to fine balance and eloquent expression. The marks of that education touched all his later preaching and writing.

But the wider world into which Francis was thrust was anything but a tranquil scholarly retreat. Paris in 1582 was caught up in a seething maelstrom of religious and civil strife. John Calvin's reforming doctrines had found a fertile soil among many of his French compatriots, and for close to forty years there was constant intrigue and intermittent warfare among the great families of France, with massacres and assassinations between Catholic and Protestant as each side vied for mastery. The struggle was to end only when Henry of Navarre (Bourbon), one of the leaders of the Protestant party and heir to the throne, agreed to become Catholic in 1593. He was crowned king the next year and passed the famous Edict of Nantes in 1598 that allowed for a measure of religious freedom to Protestants. Geneva, the spiritual headquarters of the Protestant reform, bordered on Francis de Sales's own homeland, and the controversy between Catholic and Calvinist would lend a complexion to the rest of his life and mission.

In his nineteenth year, Francis went through a frightful crisis of hope, an experience not uncommon among sensitive spirits, during which he came to believe that he was among those who were predestined to lose his soul. He felt himself on the edge of an abyss of despair, and he could only pray: "Whatever it is to be, Lord, at least let me love you in this life if I am unable to love you in eternity."<sup>1</sup> He went about for many weeks in a state of great despondency until one day, while praying at a Dominican church, he entered the chapel of the Virgin Mary, and there came across an instruction concerning the simple prayer called the "Memorare." Francis recited the prayer, and found himself immediately and completely delivered from his despondency and his fear of eternal damnation. It seems that the experience also solidified an earlier intuition concerning a vocation to consecrated life. But of this he told his parents nothing.

At twenty, Francis left Paris with a degree of master of arts and went to the University of Padua to study law. He also continued the study of theology that he had begun in Paris. Four years later he achieved a doctorate in both civil and canon law. Laden with scholarly honors and in the flush of young manhood, after nine years away from home Francis returned to Savoy and his family. His father was holding all things in readiness for his accomplished son: he had bought Francis an estate, furnished it with a library of law books, and chosen a young noblewoman for his bride. Francis acquitted himself well in his examination before the bar, and was given the unheard of offer, for such a young man, of being made a senator of the Duchy of Savoy. Everything was arranged for a splendid career of public advancement and familial duties. And then Francis did the unthinkable, at least in his father's eyes: he turned away from the glittering life opening up before him, renounced both prospective bride and senate, and declared his intention to become

a priest. The decision was a difficult one for Francis's father. Now seventy years old, he had long nurtured hopes that his eldest son would succeed him as head of the family and would care for his wife and younger children. He resisted, he fought, and he wept. Finally, seeing that there was no changing Francis's mind, and being at heart a man of faith, he gave his reluctant blessing. In 1593, at the age of twenty-six, Francis took Holy Orders.

Francis in the Chablais Francis de Sales was now a priest of the diocese of Geneva. That fact requires some explanation, since for many decades there had been no bishop and no priests at all in Geneva. The town of Annecy, twenty-five miles south of Geneva and close to the Sales family seat, was now the episcopal residence, where the exiled bishop administered those parts of the diocese that had remained Catholic. Some sense of what had happened to create this anomalous situation will be important for understanding the next chapter of Francis's life, the evangelizing mission to the Chablais region, east of Geneva along the shores of Lake Lemman. It is among the more remarkable missionary endeavors in the history of the Church.

The Swiss cantons had been an area of religious ferment and strife since the early days of the Protestant Reformation, when Ulrich Zwingli had led a reform in the city of Zurich. As in so much of Reformation history, religious conflict was inextricably tied up with political factors. At the time of the outbreak of the Reformation, the city of Geneva was sitting uneasily under the sovereignty of the Duchy of Savoy. When Protestant preachers arrived in the early 1520s, they gained a favorable hearing from many, and the question of religious affiliation quickly became embroiled with Geneva's political aspirations to become a free city. Eventually, after more than a decade of vacillation and conflict, the city freed itself from the Duchy of Savoy and declared for the Swiss Confederation and for the Protestant reform. John Calvin arrived in 1536, and under his teaching Geneva became an international center of Reformed thought and mission. Much of the surrounding region came under Protestant control, which at that time meant that Catholic worship was forbidden by law.

In 1594, the year after Francis was ordained, the Chablais region had been regained by the duke of Savoy. It had long been under Protestant rule, and the number of confessing Catholics among its population of tens of thousands was perhaps a few hundred. The official ruling house of the region was once again Catholic; but where formerly there had been fifty Catholic parishes, there remained nothing but burnt out churches. The people of the region, who had lived for two generations under Calvinist rule, were either virulently hostile to Catholicism, equating the

traditional Church with the rule of antichrist, or were studiously noncommittal, since the political situation was fluid and there was no telling who might be in charge in another few years. It was into this region that Francis went, without resources, without protection, and virtually alone, to attempt to win back the people of the Chablais to the Catholic Faith.

The previous year, the bishop of Geneva, having been eager to see Francis ordained and knowing that his father would be readier to accede to his son's desire for priesthood if it came with a position of influence, had quietly petitioned Rome to gain for Francis the office of provost of the diocese, a position second only to the bishopric itself. At his installation as provost, according to the custom of the time, Francis was to give an address to the assembled priests, canons of the Genevan diocesan chapter. His words took his hearers by surprise and generated both excitement and dismay. The recently ordained new provost boldly asserted: "We must regain Geneva!" Regaining the main city of their diocese was a project close to the heart of the exiled chapter; that was the exciting part. But the strategy Francis laid out for conquering Geneva was less welcome to his listeners. His image was that of a military siege, but a siege of a special kind. "It is by hunger and thirst, endured not by our adversaries but by ourselves, that we must repulse the enemy.... We must bring down the walls of Geneva with charity; we must invade Geneva with charity; we must recover Geneva with charity."

At a time when it was common to settle religious disputes on the battlefield, Francis had another kind of warfare in mind. Continuing his siege image, he asserted that the water supply that kept the city of Geneva alive was an aqueduct fed "by the examples of perverse priests, their actions, their words—in short, the iniquity of all—but above all, of the ecclesiastics. It is because of us that the name of God is blasphemed every day among the nations."<sup>3</sup> This opening salvo to the canons of Geneva could stand as the outline of Francis's apostolic program for the rest of his priestly life: to overcome opponents by charity and to look for the causes of the Church's division mainly in the sins of her members, especially of her priests. Love and holiness would win the day or nothing would.

When, a short time later, the bishop asked for volunteers to enter the Chablais region and attempt to reestablish Catholicism there, he found few takers. Neither he nor the duke had any resources for the mission, and the hostility of the populace to the Catholic Faith was palpable. It seemed a hopeless, not to say a perilous, task. At this point Francis showed that he was more than just a bold talker. He stepped forward and requested the mission. The project was so fraught with physical danger and so likely to fail that Francis's father was dead set against the idea. "I

allowed my son to devote himself to the service of the Church to be a confessor," he said, "but I cannot give him up to be a martyr." Francis once again prevailed, but his father denied him any kind of material assistance, refusing even to see him off. Francis thus found himself facing the task of restoring Catholicism to a district of some fifty thousand people, who had once made up fifty parishes, with a single companion and no resources beyond his own energy and courage. It was a situation reminiscent of his namesake and hero, Francis Xavier.

For six months Francis went up and down the country, speaking with people, gathering the few Catholics still left after sixty years of Calvinist rule, preaching and teaching where he could. The result was minimal. The gatherings often amounted to only a handful of people; many closed their doors in his face or even threatened him with physical violence. He finally resorted to another tactic: if he could not get people to listen to him in person, perhaps they would be willing to read something in private. He began writing short tracts on various disputed points of doctrine. "Gentlemen," he wrote in his first pamphlet, addressed to residents of Thonon, "having prosecuted for some space of time the preaching of the Word of God in your town, without obtaining a hearing from your people save rarely, casually and stealthily, wishing to leave nothing undone on my part, I have set myself to put into writing some principal reasons ... in defense of the Faith of the Church." His appeal was to reason, fairness, and charity.

"I address and offer it to you with good heart, hoping that the causes which keep you from hearing me will not have the power to hinder you from reading what I write. Meanwhile, I assure you, that you will never read a writing which shall be given you by any man more devoted to your spiritual service than I am."<sup>5</sup> Francis left copies lying about in the churches and squares and even slipped them under people's doors. The tone of the tracts was calm and measured, and respectful of the intentions and intelligence of the reader. There were no vitriolic attacks on individuals and no exaggerated distortions of Protestant doctrines. Francis paid his opponents the compliment of taking them and their teaching seriously, and he asked only a fair hearing from those he was addressing.

The effect of those writings, along with Francis's continued missionary presence - his unfailing courtesy, his calm in the face of insult, his persistence in mission, and his authentic concern for his hearers - began to have an effect. After a year and more of labor, some leading citizens of the region began to take a lively interest in Francis and his presentation of the Catholic Faith. Eventually, many began to seek reconciliation with the Church, including some Protestant ministers. Francis was able to have numerous respectful conversations with Theodore Beza, Calvin's

leading disciple in Geneva. A comment made by Beza to Francis at their first meeting gives an idea of the way Francis carried on his controversy: "Sir, you oblige me by much courtesy, and you proceed with me as I have always wished others to do, because I esteem nothing so much as candor and sincerity."

During the four years that de Sales spent in the region, two-thirds of the population re-embraced the Faith, and eighteen parishes were organized to serve the region. No doubt the existence of a Catholic overlord was a factor for some in their decision. But it is evident that the main reason for the return of so many was the effectiveness of Francis's preaching and example. That a third of the population remained Protestant makes clear that there was no serious coercion from the duke; and the political situation was unstable enough that the choice for Catholicism was not necessarily a safe bet.

Francis's success in the Chablais, mirrored by the mission of men such as the Jesuit Peter Canisius in Germany, highlights a principle that seems often in play. When the teaching of the Church is clear and the lives of her members, especially her priests, reflect that teaching and give it credibility, there is little purchase for divisions to arise and for erroneous beliefs to take root. Early Protestantism found fertile soil largely because Catholicism was corrupt and decayed. Protestant teachers and preachers were men of conviction who knew the Scriptures and who gave an example of serious discipleship to their hearers. Such qualities of sincerity and fervor bring their own authority. When the priests and bishops under their attack were tepid in their faith and ignorant of the Scriptures, to say nothing of living in outright sin, the Protestant reformers naturally won the day. But let the Church show up in full force - let there be missionary priests notable for learning, zeal, and devotion, let a Francis de Sales engage the issue, and Catholicism tended to win the day by its comprehensiveness and its cogency.

Francis as Director of Souls Soon after his four-year mission to the Chablais, Francis was named coadjutor bishop of Geneva, and three years later, at the death of the incumbent, he became bishop. In taking up that office he modeled himself on another of his heroes, Charles Borromeo, and during the twenty years of his administration he turned the Geneva diocese into a model of Church reform after the pattern given by the Council of Trent. Like Borromeo he organized synods for his priests and raised the standard of priestly life, and though he never had the resources to start his own seminary, he found ways to see that his priests were zealous and instructed. He regularly made visitations to all parts of his diocese, many of which were in remote alpine valleys. He preached often and established devotional practices, such as the Forty Hours Adoration, that helped spark fervor

among his people.

Noteworthy in his exercise of his office was his insistence on staying in Savoy, a small and out-of-the-way diocese, although he was regularly pressed to take up a prestigious position in Paris. During visits to the French capital, Francis made a strong impression on the city and the court. King Henry, whose religious convictions often seemed conveniently malleable, was nonetheless a talented leader and a shrewd judge of men, and he took a strong personal liking to Francis. He was reputed to have summed up Francis with these words: "A rare bird indeed; devout, learned and a gentleman into the bargain... He does not know the art of flattery; his mind is too sincere for that... he is gentle, good, and humble—deeply pious but without useless scruples." The king wanted to find a way to keep Francis in Paris. Had Francis been ambitious for high honors, he could have become the leading French ecclesiastic of his day. But both humility and loyalty to his home territory led him to remain in Savoy. When the possibility of the bishopric of Paris was being considered for him, Francis wrote: "I would not want to sever the marriage bond only to be married again."

Among Francis's many talents, perhaps the most impressive and the source of his most lasting influence on the Church was his gift of spiritual direction. From the time he first took orders until the end of his life, Francis was a sought-after director of souls. He brought to bear a rare combination of qualities: he was a profound theologian, a master of mystical prayer, and a person of keen insight into the inner workings of the mind and spirit. Such a combination, expressed with cultivated eloquence, might be intimidating; but in Francis these impressive abilities were united with a quiet warmth and a readiness for friendship that heartened rather than overwhelmed those he was directing.

The sources of Francis's spirituality were many, and here again he can be seen to sum up many currents of the Catholic Reformation. He was acquainted with Catherine of Genoa, whose *Treatise on Purgatory* he read habitually twice a year. His favorite bedside book was *Spiritual Combat* by Lorenzo Scupoli, the Theatine whose writing bore the influence of Catherine's spirit. He had studied many years with the Jesuits and was well acquainted with their life and spirit, an influence that was deepened through his friendship with the Jesuit Cardinal Robert Bellarmine. He met and befriended another Roman cardinal, Cesare Baronius, one of Philip Neri's earliest disciples who had taken over leadership of the Roman Oratory. His encounter with the spirit of the Oratory proved in some respects decisive; Neri's mix of humility, cheerfulness, and delight in the presence of God met in Francis a kindred spirit. As a young bishop, Francis became acquainted with the circle of

friends in Paris centered around the figure of Marie de l'Incarnation. Through her he encountered the mystical teaching of Teresa and the Carmelites. There he also befriended Pierre de Berulle, the founder of the French Oratory and the spiritual director of Vincent de Paul. Francis drew these various influences together under his own impressive understanding of the ways of prayer and the paths of holiness. The most theologically complete work of spirituality that Francis wrote is the *Treatise on the Love of God*, but by far his best known and most beloved book is the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. In this series of letters to "Philothea," all the key aspects of Francis's approach to growth in holiness can be found. The work was intended for the lay Catholic. Francis wanted to fuel the aspirations to holiness among those who were not called to consecrated religious life. He held that holiness could be found by anyone in any calling. Rather than laying out a rigorous program of prayer and special practices, he found the heart of holiness to be in a complete union of the will of the believer with the will of God. Such union could be found in every action of the day, no matter how trivial. An indication of his manner of proceeding can be seen in his encouragement to the disciple, not only to be gentle with others, but to be gentle with oneself.

Many people fall into the error of being angry because they have been angry, vexed because they have given way to vexation, thus keeping up a chronic state of irritation, which adds to the evil of what is past, and prepares the way for a fresh fall on the first occasion. Moreover, all this anger and irritation against one's self fosters pride, and springs entirely from self-love, which is disturbed and fretted by its own imperfection....

For instance: Let me suppose that I am specially seeking to conquer vanity, and yet that I have fallen conspicuously into that sin;—instead of taking myself to task as abominable and wretched, for breaking so many resolutions, calling myself unfit to lift up my eyes to Heaven, as disloyal, faithless, and the like, I would deal pitifully and quietly with myself. "Well! my poor heart, here we are, fallen into the ditch which we had made so firm a resolution to avoid; let us arise and leave it forever; let us implore the mercy of God and trust that it will help us to be more steadfast in the future, and let us place ourselves again on the path of humility; courage! henceforth let us be more on our guard, God will help us, we shall do well enough."

Francis's most notable disciple was the French noblewoman Jane Frances de Chantal. Jane de Chantal was a wife and mother, widowed at the age of twenty-eight, who felt called to a life of consecrated holiness in the midst of her family duties. She received in prayer the assurance that a spiritual guide would be given to

her. A few years later she met Francis de Sales, in whom she recognized the promised spiritual mentor. Francis became her spiritual director and close collaborator. The providential meeting led eventually to their joint founding, in 1610, of the congregation of the Visitation Sisters. In keeping with the spirituality of de Sales, the new congregation was designed for those who did not have the ability or desire to enter one of the regular ascetic orders but who hoped to pursue holiness in visiting the sick and the poor in their own homes. The congregation eventually came to be cloistered, and spread quickly across France. It would be in one of the houses of the Visitation, in Paray-le-Monial, that St. Margaret Mary Alacoque would receive the visionary invitation to establish the devotion of the Sacred Heart.

By the time of Francis de Sales's death in 1622, a reformed Church was well on her way to establishing a regenerated Catholic culture. The reforming vision of the Council of Trent was finding its way ever more fully into the fabric of the Church's life, all aspects of which were being touched and transformed. The contemplative religious orders, the Carmelites and the Benedictines, were reconnecting with their original spirit. The mendicant orders were undergoing revival and reform, most notably with the Capuchin Franciscans, but also among the Dominicans and Augustinians. New apostolic religious societies like the Jesuits, the Theatines, and the Ursulines were growing rapidly and initiating vigorous missionary and educational endeavors. The diocesan priesthood was being radically transformed by the establishment of seminaries and by the example of the Oratorians of St. Philip and other like-minded priestly societies. Bishops had many heroic examples of reforming prelates, most notably Charles Borromeo, before their eyes. The laity were being equipped with a vision for holiness in the midst of daily life. If it was true that the reform took root unevenly and that there was much still to be done, it is also true that a profound change had come over the life of the Church. There was an atmosphere of resurrection in the bursting energy of the Baroque culture, captured so well in the architecture and sculpture of Gian Lorenzo Bernini and in the cultural and spiritual flowering of what France has since come to call its "splendid century."