I am honored and truly excited with the invitation given me by DeSales University and in particular by the Salesian Center for Faith and Culture to give this homily inaugurating this first Heritage Week celebration honoring the spiritual legacy of St. François de Sales.

When I was a seminarian studying in Rome I made a visit to the Birmingham Oratory where the great nineteenth-century churchman John Henry Newman lived much of his life. On the wall over the altar where he said his daily Mass, Cardinal Newman had placed pictures of his favorite persons, living and dead, whom he wished to remember at his Mass. One of the pictures prominent on the wall, I remember, was that of St. François de Sales. How appropriate this was, because it was de Sales who, in his treatise on preaching, provided Newman with the famous motto he adopted when he was created a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII: *cor ad cor loquitor* (“heart speaks to heart”). According to the great bishop of Geneva, St. François de Sales, a homily which is truly effective is one which passes from the heart of the speaker directly to the heart of the listener, touching them both as the deepest levels of their being. *Cor ad cor loquitor*. In this homily I am going to explore how listening to your own heart as a way of hearing God’s own voice is at the center of the spirituality St. François de Sales taught.

It has been rightly said that the spirituality of St. François and his person are one and the same. By himself he is in the history of spirituality his own spiritual school. As I hope to explain, St. François developed his spirituality not as a theory or philosophy of life but as a way of personal survival and as a way of helping others. He wrote two great treatises for which he is justly famous: *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, for beginners in the spiritual life, and *A Treatise on the Love of God*, his masterpiece. But the best immersion into his spiritual teaching may be found in the volumes of letters he wrote giving spiritual counsel to countless individuals. It is said his butler used to chide him for this, saying he was wasting too much paper.

As a young person like many of you, St. François learned the hard way that he had to listen to what his heart was telling him – not what was coming to him from the outside, particularly from his controlling father. He was sent off to Paris under the supervision of a tutor to study with the Jesuits, far from his home in the Savoy Mountains. There he had the first of two spiritual crises. His friends, Saint Jeanne François de Chantal described it in her testimony. He sank into a deep depression, convinced that he was totally without worth and a complete failure and destined to hell. His sleep was disturbed, and even his complexion changed. What ultimately brought him out of this profound sadness of soul was the sudden revelation as he prayed before Mary’s image of her maternal love for him, a love he could trust and did not have to earn.

Later on he would spend nearly ten years going to the best law school of the time in Padua, again at the insistence of his father. While there he adopted a harsh spirituality of penances and self-
denial which damaged his health to such an extent that he nearly died. He even willed his body to science! It was then that he learned to be gentle with his own spirit. The words of Jesus came back to him: “Come to me, all you who labor and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy, my burden is light.” (Mt. 11:28-30)

After finishing law school, he was informed by his father that the father had found the girl he should marry; he should go and meet her. Still not confident in himself, he asked his mother to intervene and explain he had decided upon another career – he wanted to follow his own heart and become a priest.

As a priest and then as bishop he advised and comforted many from the spiritual wisdom he had acquired by listening to his own heart and hearing there God’s voice. His whole approach to religious devotion – his word for what we now call our spirituality – was that it should not ever hurt anyone or be a burden to them, but that it should enhance and ennoble their lives. It has rightly been described by the French historian of spirituality, Henri Bremond, as “devout humanism.” It is a humanism because it respects the human person and the human scale; it is called “devout” because it challenges our humanity to grow to its full stature as a son or daughter of God. It his own words, devotion is charity burst into flames.

St. François distrusted radical changes as fundamentally unstable and often inauthentic. He wished to respect a person who is and always will be imperfect. In fact, he said in one of his famous sayings we should love our imperfections, not just strive to eliminate them, because they will teach us humility and our need for God and God’s grace. “By little and by little” was his advice and it has inspired many, including in our day the great social activist and servant of God, Dorothy Day, who used that phrase as a title for a collection of her essays. He said that sometimes people try to be angels without being much as human beings, so we should try first to become good-enough human beings. In his own words “Un saint triste es un triste saint” (“a saint who is sad is a sad saint indeed”).

Rather than strive for the one-time heroic gesture, he advised we should try to practice everyday virtues such as ordinary kindness, patience, courtesy, forgiveness and pleasantness, ordinary virtues which it turns out are not so ordinary and make a huge difference in how life goes for everyone. In other words our spirituality is not a leisure-time activity or a separate department of our life—it is our life, lived in a certain way. It is “living Jesus.”

St. François was convinced that everyone without exception can have such a spiritual life. It used to be believed that only the exceptional ones who lived in the special circumstances of the monastery or convent had the opportunity to live a spiritual life. Not at all, according to St. François. Of course if you were a wife and mother or businessman or soldier or cook – or a student – your spiritual life would take on a different shape out of necessity. You adopt the spiritual life that fits you. He stressed, for example, the necessity of the practice of daily meditation. You say you don’t have time? How much time do you have? 10 minutes? Well then, meditate 10 minutes, but do it everyday, because by daily meditation you will be learning Jesus, his values, his way of dealing with people, his attitudes, and making them your own.
The Second Vatican Council concluded 40 years ago last year. It was the very first ecumenical council that had anything to say about being a lay Christian in the Church and in the world. It taught that every baptized person is called to the same perfection, the same holiness. There are not two classes of practicing divine charity, only one, and persons who are called to be lay persons and those called to be religious are to strive for that perfection but by different paths. As you can see, St. François anticipated that fundamental insight of the Second Vatican Counsel. That council always identified as the greatest spiritual danger of our time the separation of faith from life, being one person on Sunday and somebody else the rest of the week.

Many of you here tonight can be greatly helped by the spiritual insight of St. François de Sales to listen to your own heart so that you can discover and follow the path in life that God has chosen for you and that will give you the greatest happiness. This was confirmed for me recently by a spiritual conversation I had with one of my parishioners who works in personnel matters for a large corporation. He explained that in the business world people often live with the false impression that if they stay around long enough and do their job reasonably well they will be entitled to promotion and automatically higher salaries. But, as he knows only too well, people often are not particularly happy in what they are doing and therefore not particularly productive for the company.

He gave me a copy of the workbook which his company required every long-term employee seeking promotion to complete. It is called If You Knew Who You Were, You Could Be Who You Are. The theory behind the workbook is that work is a form of self-expression, and so the work we chose for our livelihood should express who we are and our particular gifts [and so provide us] with a life of satisfaction, sense of contribution and joy. How many unfortunate people, on the other hand (some say as many as 80% of the workforce), are living for the weekend or early retirement when they can do what they really want to do.

This is another way of saying what St. François taught: to listen deeply to our hearts. Some are conditioned to think that listening to your heart is selfish, that it can mislead you because our hearts often do not know what will lead to our fulfillment. According to St. François, who in this regard is highly indebted to St. Augustine, our hearts were made for God who alone can give us the greatest pleasure and joy: listening to what our heart says, deeply and thoughtfully, we hear God speaking, not just our selfish desires. In other words, in another well-known sentence of St. François, “Be who you are and be that perfectly well.”

I’d like to leave you with a single anecdote which for me summed up well the spiritual legacy of St. François de Sales. In October of 2003, I was in Rome for the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the election of Pope John Paul II. I had been present at his election and I was very pleased to be present again for this significant anniversary. Afterward, my classmate and friend, Archbishop Levada, now the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and I made a personal pilgrimage to the Savoy region of France to visit the sites associated with the life of St. François. Having written a book based on his spirituality just a short time before – it’s called Believing in God – I welcomed this chance to connect with the landscape which had so shaped him and to connect with all the places where he toiled so zealously for the Lord. Our base was in Geneva and from there we drove to Thorens, where he was born and where he was baptized. We were under some pressure because our Salesian guide told us that if we wanted to
concelebrate Mass at the Cathedral in Annecy, which François used because Geneva was still under the control of the Calvinists, we had to arrive at least by 11:15 AM. We were at last at the goal of our pilgrimage, the cathedral of Annecy, where in the sanctuary facing each other are the golden effigies of St. François and Ste. Jeanne François de Chantal, his spiritual daughter and great friend. There was one unfortunate obstacle however: the Mass had been reserved by a group of pilgrims from Germany and their young chaplain did not welcome any other priests to join in. All seemed lost until the sacristan, a young Visitandine nun of the community founded by St. François and Ste. Jeanne François intervened. With great courtesy she explained to the young chaplain why it would be appropriate for him to welcome us to the celebration. And he concurred.

That simple act of human thoughtfulness was the perfect expression of those ordinary but also very extraordinary human virtues that make up the spirituality we are celebrating today. May St. François de Sales inspire each and every one of you to live that spirituality, and continue his heritage, here in the Lehigh Valley and wherever you go.