CENTER VALLEY – In her new best-seller, “John Paul the Great,” Peggy Noonan dedicates an entire chapter to her experience with the saint-making ceremonies in the Catholic Church. Now an editorial writer for the Wall Street Journal, Ms. Noonan was the first woman ever to make a speech from the stage of the Vatican’s audience hall, which she did to introduce the world premiere of a film about Mother Theresa of Calcutta. For Noonan, this experience was “one of the greatest moments of my life, a moment that was an accident, a challenge, and a blessing.” Considering she had once been responsible for crafting the messages of the world’s power brokers, as a presidential speechwriter for Ronald Regan, what was it about this simple talk that made her experience such a defining moment?

The answer lies in the phenomenon of the saints, those persons whose lives give witness to heroic virtue and whose embodiment of holiness gives rise to public acclaim. It’s no small wonder that Pope John Paul II, whom Noonan remembers in the book as “a spiritual father” to the world, proclaimed more “blesseds” and “saints” than all the popes for the previous four centuries combined. He knew that examples of goodness were needed for our world. He recognized that each of us searches for that goodness in ourselves. He held up for universal recognition persons of all walks of life, including the first husband and wife to be proclaimed saints specifically as a married couple, precisely because goodness attracts us, virtue invites us, and holiness inspires us all to “be not afraid.”

Saints have always been the object of popular adoration. The reason for such acclaim is not simply the heroism of what they’ve done, but the holiness of who they are. That character trait touches a chord in all of us, by tapping into our own naturally human desire to be the best persons we can be. Though we may not share the same abilities or have the same opportunities, each of us desires to emulate the saints because we know the power of goodness. The saints
bring that power home. We know them as actual persons, not just legendary figures. In them we see that holiness is real, not just an ideal.

Many saints transcend the era of their historical lives. For instance, a Thomas More, with his death-defying defense of moral conscience over political expediency, remains as relevant for lawyers and judges and legislators today as for sixteenth century England. Some saints have a special connection to areas of popular interest and become “patrons” of particular activities. Consider St. Jude, patron of lost causes, or St. Anthony, to whom so many turn to find lost things!

One of “our own” saints in the Lehigh Valley is Francis de Sales (1567-1622), whose feast is celebrated annually on January 24. Lesser known than the one from Assisi, this St. Francis, patron of DeSales University, remains universally significant as one of only thirty-three “doctors” of the Church, a designation that affirms the soundness of their writings for readers of any age and place. Vignettes from his life show his enduring and endearing relevance to people in the Church and in the world.

As a pastor, he once created a rudimentary sign language to teach one of the household staff who could not hear. Today we value special education in all its varieties.

As provost of the diocesan clergy, he once lambasted his colleagues for their lack of attention to educating people in the faith. Gallup polls about church attendance today demonstrate the results of similar inattention.

As a humanist, he once defended a scholar whose teachings about astronomy followed Galileo and challenged the prevailing attitudes of believers. Today’s debates about intelligent design show the wisdom of distinguishing science from religion without making them mutually exclusive.

As a writer, he used practical common sense to deal with a myriad of issues that remain common concerns today. When a woman wrote to him worried about her lack of piety for not going to church on a daily basis, he, the bishop, actually advised her to stay home during the week; true devotion, he suggested, would be for her to take good care of her seven children instead! His maxims are memorable, and still in use: his advice to “be who you are, and be that well” has become the familiar slogan “be all that you can be.”

Saints, like Francis de Sales, are not the exclusive purview of Catholics or any church-goers. Their heritage is universally human; their holiness, globally powerful. To celebrate their legacy is to see and to seek what we are all called to be.