In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan was dubbed “The Great Communicator.” Most observers at the time credited Reagan’s ability to communicate to his acting career, his comfort level in front of the camera, his ability to project sincerity and conviction about what he was saying, his skill at staying “on message.” Like politicians before and after him, Reagan was often speaking the words of his speechwriters, but he did so ably, smoothly, and forcefully. Even his opponents acknowledged this.

Four hundred years earlier, in the Duchy of Savoy, a man named Francis de Sales proved himself to be the “Great Communicator” of his day—and unlike Ronald Reagan, de Sales wrote all his own stuff. Francis’s communications consisted of his letters—10,000 of them, as Fr. Schubert reminded us yesterday—to people in all walks of life. He advised them how to find God in their own circumstances, what pitfalls to avoid and what habits to nurture in their spiritual journey. No problem was too small to claim his attention. One measure of his dedication to souls certainly, is the fact that he normally relied on only four hours sleep per night, working on letters into the early morning hours.

In addition to his letters, Francis virtually invented the pamphlet. In his work to convert the people of the Chablais in 1595, as Father Dirk Koster recounts in his biography of de Sales, Francis was disappointed that so few listeners were coming to hear his sermons. So, Francis said: “I am going to write about our belief. If they don’t come to me, I will go to them.” So Francis set to work writing out his catechism, found friends to copy his work (by hand of course) and post the pamphlets throughout the area. Many people read them, and many re-converted to the Catholic faith because of them. These pamphlets were eventually collected and bound into a book that ran to 300 pages, and entitled Controversies. Francis’s pamphlets were the forerunners of magazines and reviews. They were cited in 1923 when Pope Pius XI declared Francis the patron of journalists and writers. All those involved in the press, especially the Catholic press, can rightly claim Francis as their patron.

The written communication for which Francis is best remembered, of course, is the Introduction to the Devout Life, a classic spiritual work which has been a perennial best seller for those people who wish to strengthen their relationship with God and others. Everyone is called to holiness, Francis insisted, thus anticipating one main theme of the Second Vatican Council 350 years later. A more profound examination of the soul’s
relationship with God found its expression in the *Treatise on the Love of God*, an acknowledged theological masterpiece.

During his lifetime, Francis was famous not only for his written work, but for his preaching. Those who listened to him found his words persuasive, his spirit contagious, his faith transparent. The love of God was so palpable in him that people were drawn to him. He spoke in words of course, and eloquent words at that, but it was because of his transparent love of God that his heart could speak to other hearts, cor ad cor.

When he spoke or wrote of the love of God, Francis was not speaking of theological abstractions. He was speaking of what he himself had experienced. During his famous crisis at the age of 19, he was worried that he would be damned. But he emerged from this experience determined to serve the God that--he now realized--loved him so much.

So far, I have spoken only of Francis de Sales on this Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, the apostle. I think it highly appropriate, however, that we remember Paul’s conversion at the same time we remember Francis, a great communicator of his age. Paul, like Francis, wrote letters, probably not as many as Francis, but those he did write are among the most important and earliest documents in our religion. Paul called people to live in the new way of Christ which he had formerly persecuted, but later embraced.

Like Francis, Paul was intent on doing the Lord’s work once he realized what God wanted him to do. Like Francis, Paul had a personal encounter, a dramatic encounter, when God communicated to him that God would use him to do his work. Like Francis, once Paul became convinced of the power of God’s love in his life, he felt compelled to share God’s good news. “I am compelled to preach the gospel,” claimed Paul. “I am nothing if I do not preach it.” By his preaching, by his letters, by his life, and ultimately by his death, Paul used the talents God had given him to advise, correct, encourage, console, reprove, and rally the people in those infant Christian communities. Paul, like Francis, worked tirelessly and selflessly to preach the gospel to the people of his time and place. Like Francis, he was intent on doing the will of God. He confesses to longing for death so he can meet Christ, but tells us that he will continue living as long as he can be of use in sharing the good news of God’s kingdom.

In our relationships and encounters with our fellow human beings, we are called to communicate that same good news. What Paul did in the first century Roman empire, what Francis did in 16th and 17th century France, we are called to do here in the Lehigh Valley in 2006. Due to modern technology, we have many media at our disposal today, means of communication that Paul and Francis could not have imagined. We can and should use these media to spread the truths of our faith. In the end, though, whether we preach, or write, whether we use a pen, a keyboard, e-mail, or the internet, it is still cor ad cor, our hearts speaking to other hearts hungry for the spiritual nourishment that
sustained Paul of Tarsus, the tireless apostle to the Gentiles, and Francis of Savoy, the gentle and great Doctor of Love.

As we approach God’s eucharistic table, let us embrace and be embraced by the Lord. Let us live Jesus whom Paul loved, whom Francis loved. Let us live Jesus whom we love.