Choice is one of the key aspects of American living. Americans hold sacred the right to choose. It is viewed as a freedom and the fundamental right open to all Americans. Choice impacts and permeates all areas of life in American society.

Every American is told and reminded constantly that he has a choice in all matters: Americans may choose their government, they may choose their jobs, they may choose to live life in any way that they desire. Americans may also choose their religion and their spirituality. Choice lies in the heart of this matter, for the spirituality chosen, if one is indeed chosen at all, will be present in the minds and attitudes of the American public. In this case, choice can influence one’s entire life.

Choice, specifically with regards to religion, is the choice of a god or gods before all other things. Those who authentically enter into a religion and spirituality do so by choosing their god over all else. However, the concept of choice itself and its overall affect on a person’s life varies by spirituality. Every spirituality manifests this choice in different ways. In Salesian Spirituality, the spirituality founded by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal, the idea of choice is a central theme. It is the direct act of choosing Jesus above all else and then actively living out this choice that propels Salesian Spirituality forward.

Choosing God manifests itself in two different ways: in prayer with Him and in loving actions performed throughout daily life. The Salesian choice does not consist only in choosing God, but of choosing Him in the midst of an ordinary life. If a person chooses God, if he really begins to “Live Jesus” as de Sales recommends, then his entire life will be changed both interiorly and exteriorly. In essence, the man will be pulled out of his ordinary life and sent to God, and then returned to ordinary life in order to “live Jesus.” Choosing Jesus and then living in a way that manifests this is the fundamental aspect and the inherent choice of Salesian Spirituality.

Francis de Sales himself provides the best example of choosing Jesus and allowing this choice to illuminate his life. While a student in Paris, de Sales entered into a period where he underwent a serious temptation to despair. While studying for a law degree, de Sales also privately studied theology. He enmeshed himself in the study of Augustine and Aquinas, followed the lectures of Gilbert Génébrard, and read the teachings of Calvin and Luther on predestination. De Sales believed himself damned and for weeks labored under the unbelievable tension that this caused. However, as stated in his notes, de Sales worried about his eventual damnation, but then made a profound choice. Kneeling in chapel one day he made an act of abandonment to God.

“Whatever it is Lord [salvation or damnation] at least let me love you in this life if I am unable to love you in eternity.” [1]

De Sales made a choice to love God regardless of whether God had already, in his mind, predestined him to salvation or to hell. His act of heroic abandonment was above all else an act of choosing Jesus. Throughout the rest of his life, de
Sales would live out this choice. He would proclaim to all people both in word, through his writings and preaching, and in his very nature, that he had chosen Jesus, that Jesus lived in Him, and through him was presented to the entire world.

Choosing Jesus is also the focal point of de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*. The first part of the *Introduction* presents gently worded arguments to prompt the reader into choosing a devout life- choosing a life where the person responds to God’s will in his life. De Sales knew, as we know now, that people have many different options and ideologies, philosophies, and religions to choose from when attempting to choose how to live their life. For De Sales, Jesus was and is just one of the many options that people can choose, and through his writings he attempts to convince people to choose Jesus as the best and only option for a good, happy, and peaceful life. For those who had already chosen Jesus, de Sales lead them deeper into devotion and the heart of Jesus.

Repeatedly, de Sales states that the person must want this choice, and he is insistent that the person see the relationship involved in choosing God. The relationship is two-way, between man and God, except that God does not force Himself on anyone. In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, God is described as waiting for man like a lover waiting for his beloved:

> “See the divine lover at the gate. He does not simply knock once.

> He continues to knock. He calls the soul: come arise my beloved, hurry!

> and He puts his hand on the lock to see if He can open it…”[2]

For de Sales, God desired man just as much and more than man can desire God.

God in essence, according to Francis, waits for man’s choice. He wants man and yearns for man, but man must choose Him. If man chooses Him, then God and man unite in a covenantal relationship that manifests itself through prayer and good works.

Ultimately at the heart of the choice stand the person and Jesus. Underneath all externals one must choose whether or not to enter into relationship with Christ. In choosing Jesus one does not surrender himself, but completes Himself. In de Sales’ words, choosing Jesus “engrave[s] His name on our hearts.”[3] This leads to a profound paradigm shift in one’s point of view on life. An interior relationship with Christ in the heart is now not enough- now one wants to “live Jesus,” where one acts in such a manner so that Christ is made present in all actions.[4] Through these actions it seems as if Christ is actually physically in the world again through us. The ultimate choice has been made, the body has been surrendered to Christ “and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”[5]

This new dynamic choice will profoundly affect the person’s life not only interiorly, but also exteriorly. Now, through daily actions taken in everyday life, Jesus is present in the world. He is present not only in prayer, but in the teacher’s lounge, in the corporate meeting room, on the stage, at the construction site, in the restaurant, and in every other occupation and vocation chosen by man.

The person who has just chosen Jesus will begin to slowly make changes in his life. At first, the choice of living Jesus would not be outwardly apparent because the person is now struggling interiorly- that is, he is striving to conform himself to live like Jesus. Only after some progress has been made interiorly will an outward difference be visible. For example, a secretary could have chosen to live Jesus. At first it is not apparent because she is working on herself- on striving to recognize and fix her own problems and imperfections through the means of prayer and her interior relationship with Christ. Eventually, an outward sign becomes visible. She begins to be more patient around the office, and more pleasant to other co-workers. She starts making the coffee without complaint. Outwardly, she still does the same job everyday, but now it is done with and for Jesus. The job is the same, but now it is pleasing to God. Others may soon notice that she herself possesses some new interior joy or happiness in her job that originally was not there. This new joy comes from her choosing Jesus. She chose Christ and allowed Him to take possession of her, and through the relationship they now share, she now lives life in a different manner and style.

Francis de Sales had the same experience. Upon his consecration as Bishop in 1602, he later remarked that “God has taken me out of myself in order to take me to Himself- that is, He converted me from what I was to myself into what I was to be for them.” Here de Sales affirms the value of his choice. God took him because de Sales allowed it, just as
Christ will take anyone who allows it, who chooses him. Then, in the process of this choice, de Sales was given back to the people filled with the love of the heart of Jesus. Likewise, those who choose Jesus, as de Sales did, and deal with the consequences of their choice, eventual surrender of their very being to His heart, return to the world ready to act upon their choice and to work for the improvement and betterment of mankind.

[4] Ibid.