If there is one message in particular that Francis de Sales preached to Christians of his day, it is this: all are called to holiness. *All are called* – not just monks, cloistered nuns and a few spiritual athletes who are capable of rigorous fasts, long vigils and harsh austerities. No, holiness is not restricted to those few who are privileged with extraordinary physical, intellectual and moral capacities. It is everybody’s concern, everybody’s destiny.

**ASTONISHING**

In preaching and writing this, Francis de Sales surprised more than one of his contemporaries and still continues to surprise a certain number of our contemporaries. Why is this?

No doubt the reason was that, during his time as well as during ours, there is a certain restricted image of sanctity conceived up by the majority of people. Spontaneously one thinks of the calendar of saints and says: “I hardly see myself on *that* list!” or else one imagines extraordinary beings, far surpassing ordinary people and far distant from ordinary life. They imagine a category of beings closer to angels than to humans and say to themselves, “That’s not for me!”

A number of spiritual authors have fallen into this same error, as Francis says in the preface to his *Introduction to the Devout Life*:
“Almost all those who have up to now written about devotion have been concerned with instructing people wholly withdrawn from the world or have at least taught a kind of devotion that leads to such a total withdrawal.”

Many are also frightened off by the words, “holiness” and “perfection.” Perhaps this is so because “holiness” is considered an ideal which is very beautiful, even admirable, but too lofty for the majority of people and, thus, virtually inaccessible. Or, perhaps it is so because “perfection” connotes people without faults or weaknesses, people who always do what is exactly right; people who are so perfect that they are either an exasperation or a discouragement to others.

Finally, many find it less pretentious simply to be “good people” or Christians who follow the Gospel as closely as possible but without “aspiring to the life of perfection.”

However, Jesus’ words are there, clear and direct, and addressed to all: “You must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). The Apostles, in their turn echo this same thing: “It is God’s will that you grow in holiness” (1 Thess. 4:3). Paul was emphatic to those first Christians of Thessalonica and to others: “God desires that you become saints.” It was an appeal already addressed to the chosen people even before the coming of Jesus: “Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lv. 19:2). This text was taken word for word by St. Peter in his address to the new Christians: “Become holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, after the likeness of the holy One who called you; remember, what Scripture says, ‘Be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pt. 1:15-16).

**NO EXCEPTIONS WHATSOEVER**

In his turn, Francis de Sales writes without the slightest hesitancy:

“My purpose is to instruct those who live in cities, within families, and at court, and whose situation obliges them to live an ordinary life as far as externals are concerned. But since they are under the assumption that it is altogether impossible for them to do so, these people will often not even consider undertaking the devout life….”

What gives Francis the daring to extend this invitation to everyone without exception?

His reason is simple but profound: holiness is not something one achieves on one’s own. It isn’t a matter of sculpting a statue of one’s self to be placed in some niche or store window for the admiration of passersby.

Holiness is never the result of human effort, it is not something that one can attain by dint of some training or by using some human means alone. It is not, for example, realized thanks to some exotic gymnastics, or thanks to some programme and rhythm of life, or to some asceticism of body and spirit.

Such things are not of course altogether useless, nor are they lacking from one’s spiritual journey. Francis de Sales will speak of them. But holiness is the result of something other than
human effort, however noble. Holiness is a divine-human adventure: it was God who entered human history and it is He who leads people into His own proper life.

Thus, the first step on “the way of perfection” (as St. Teresa of Avila calls it) consists in welcoming the One who comes to us on behalf of His Father, the only-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ. He describes Himself as “the one sent by the Father” (Jn. 7:28; 8:16).

He comes to speak to us because He is the Father’s “Word” (Jn. 1:1-18). We are thus invited to listen, which is the first step to be made on the way to perfection.

We are to listen so as to know. For the Son disclosed the secrets of His life with the Father: “The Father loves the Son and has given everything into His hands…the Father and I are one…”

This listening to Jesus allows us to know that “God is Love” and that He “has so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son” (Jn. 3:16).

Jesus’ actions and manner of living reveal God’s love for the human family: close to us, He listens, heals, encourages; He brings us peace, hope and joy. Since He is the perfect reflection of the One from whom He comes, He can say: “The one who sees me sees the Father” (Jn. 14:9).

He calls all to come to Him, to be with Him and to learn from Him how to be like the God of love: “Come to me, all of you…” (Mt. 11:28). He invites all, as individuals and collectively, to follow Him: “Come, follow me.”

After the example of Jesus’ first companions and “disciples,” millions have set out on the journey to accompany Him on His way of truth and life. They have permitted themselves to be guided by Him and to be gradually transformed by His Spirit. They have become true “saints,” perhaps not all inscribed on the calendar of saints but all recognized and celebrated by the entire Church on All Saints Day.

THE WAY OF LOVE

Paul writes to the Christians of Ephesus: “Be imitators of God as his dear children. Follow the way of love.” (Eph. 5:1-2).

Response to this call, by setting out on the way of love, activates human freedom and supposes its cooperation. The human person is far from passive in this adventure: he or she cooperates with a gift which is altogether gratuitous.

Thus, holiness is neither the simple result of human effort nor is it the automatic result of a “grace” from out of the blue. A combination of both is needed: God’s gratuitous gift and free human cooperation with that gift. In this adventure, God and the human person are linked.

In this letter to the Philippians (2:12-13), Paul expresses well these two elements of gratuity and cooperation:
Work…to achieve your salvation. *It* is God who, is His good will toward you, begets in you any measure of desire or achievement.”

God’s gift is totally gratuitous. One must, however, work to put it into practice and to allow it to bear the fruit which God intends.

All this helps us to understand that holiness is neither beyond our reach, nor does it necessarily consist in accomplishing extraordinary things. Essentially, it is *incorporation into Jesus Christ*: the baptized person becomes one with Christ. One’s whole life consists in making this reality come alive. One must become each day a little more what one is already at baptism and what Jesus Christ is by nature: a Son of God.

This is done by “imitating Jesus Christ”: by following in Christ’s steps and, like Him, by journeying on “the way of love.”

This imitation and incorporation is made possible by the Holy Spirit who dwells within the baptized. One need only collaborate with the Holy Spirit, particularly through prayer and the sacraments.

Francis de Sales says this in the second part of his *Introduction to the Devout Life* which opens with a chapter on prayer. He especially recommends prayer of the spirit and of the heart and “particularly that which is made on the life and passion of Our Lord: by often reflecting on Him in meditation, your entire soul will be filled with Him; you will learn His manner of being and model your actions after His.”

His conclusion recalls Paul’s thoughts on the linkage between divine grace and human action:

“By remaining close to the Saviour through meditation and by observing His words, actions and affections, grace will soon teach us how to speak, act and will like Him.”

When he speaks of the Eucharist, he places at the very centre of the Christian life “the ineffable mystery which contains the very depths of divine charity and through which God truly joins Himself to us, wondrously gifting us thereby with His graces and favours” (12,14).

“Imitate God…follow love’s way after Christ…” For the disciples of Jesus, Francis de Sales calls that perfect love which Jesus lived, “devotion” (“Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them unto the end.”) (Jn. 13:1). Devotion is that “perfection of charity” which Jesus lived and which is to be lived by all those who wish to follow Him.

Devotion is accessible to all, without exception. From the first pages of his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which he wrote for all Christians, Francis de Sales solemnly declares that:

"It is an error, even a heresy, to want to see the devout life banished from the company of soldiers, the worker’s shop, the court of princes, the home of married couples…because wherever we are, we can and we ought to aspire to the life of perfection (1,3).”
TO LOVE HUMBLY

This is the principle. How is it put into practice?

If, in following Christ, it is love which makes us “holy”; it is love which makes us “perfect” as the heavenly Father is perfect; then one can say that it is both necessary and sufficient to love.

This was the opinion of Francis which he expressed in his Treatise of the Love of God (1,6): “Having created us in His image and likeness, God desires that, as in Himself, everything in us be accomplished by love and for love.” God is love; He acts by love and for love. Thus, we too must be governed by love and for love.

Now, since there is no true love without humility, humility must form the foundation of the edifice we wish to build. We are “God’s dwelling place” (1 Cor.3:16) whose building materials have been given to us to be put into place according to the architect’s intention, while respecting all the building codes. This is how both the Gospel and Francis de Sales describe “humility”: first of all, we must realize, that we are not absolute masters but only tenants, “resident aliens,” as a text from the second century already attests (Letter to Diognetus). Thus, at the beginning of each new day, we have to receive ourselves anew, welcoming our persons and our work from the hands of the One Who, because He loves us, calls us to live and to build. In effect, humility is a matter of a loving dependence which in no way lessens our dignity but rather empowers us by giving us access to the Infinite.

Love and humility are inseparable. “Charity is wed to humility.”

Indeed, it is “charity” (the love which comes from God and which is lived by us), and charity alone, “which places us in perfection.” And this love is given to all those whose heart is simple enough and sufficiently empty of self to receive it:

“To receive God’s grace into our hearts, they must first be emptied of any inappropriate self-pride (IDL, 3,4).”

SAINTS TODAY

Sanctity is for everyone. This truth was proclaimed for our times by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), especially in its dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium. Its chapter Five is entitled, “The Universal Call to Holiness.”

Its presentation is very close to that of Francis de Sales. It can be summed up in this way:

“To the eyes of faith, the Church is holy, because it has its origin in God who is holy, because it is the bride of Christ who is ‘the Holy One of God,’ and because it is indwelt and given life by the Holy Spirit. By their baptism, all the members of the Church participate in this holiness of God and are called upon to actualize that holiness within their lives: they are to clearly manifest what they already are. Thus, the Christian life is collaboration with a gift received. This collaboration is accomplished by recognizing that Jesus Christ is the source of the Christian
character of the baptized and that it is He who leads the baptized into the full flowering of this Christian character by the gift of His Spirit.”

Francis de Sales’ vision is totally one with that of the Second Vatican Council and is articulated in practically the same language. Several citations from both will suffice to show this.

Francis writes: “Believe me…devotion is the delight of delights and the queen of the virtues because it is the perfection of charity” (1,2)…"Charity alone places us in perfection.” (3,8).

And the Council says: “It is charity towards God and neighbor which characterized the true disciple of Christ” (LG 42).

As title for the third chapter of Part One of his Introduction, Francis has: “Devotion is Possible in Every Vocation and Profession.”

The Council entitles Chapter V of Lumen Gentium: “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church.”

If the Church can be compared to a garden, then Christians are its living plants and flowers. Every one is required; each has his or her place and function; all have the same basic calling and mission: to receive from God their unique beauty so as to permit His face to shine before the human family.

At creation, God commanded each of the plants to bear fruit, “each according to its kind” (Gn.1:11). He commands Christians, who are the living plants of His Church, to produce fruits of devotion, each according to his or her position and vocation” (IDL 1,3).

The Council teaches the same thing: “In the Church, all are called to holiness…It is expressed in many ways by the individuals who, each according to his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love, thus sanctifying others” (LG 39).

But does holiness have any relationship to life in the world and to the history of the human family? Emphatically so, respond both Francis and the Council. Christians are members of the human family and nothing which they experience is foreign to life in the world.

“No, devotion spoils nothing when it is true devotion. Rather it perfects everything…Care of the family is made more peaceful, love of husband and wife more sincere, service of the prince more faithful, and every other occupation more pleasant and agreeable” (1,3).

The Council translates the same sentiment for today in these words: “The call to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity is made to all, no matter what their state or walk of life is. By this holiness a more human manner of life is also fostered in earthly society” (LG 40).

Thus, there can be no doubt about it: all are called to holiness, and each one precisely where he or she is, according to their condition.
The conclusion of both Francis and the Council is the same: “Wherever we are, we can and ought to aspire to the perfect life,” according to Francis; and “All of Christ’s faithful are invited and obliged to pursue holiness and the perfection of their state in life,” according to the Council.

From now on, the teaching of Francis de Sales forms part of the Church’s commonweal. Rooted in the Tradition begun with Christ and His apostles, his teaching has in fact been broadly recognized and integrated into the Church’s teaching for almost four centuries. It was articulated again for our age by the Second Vatican Council and by Pope Paul VI who led the Council to its conclusion.

On January 29, 1967, this pope addressed pilgrims who had come to Rome. He announced to them his letter, Sabaudiae Gemma (Gem of Savoy), commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of Francis de Sales. He said: “You certainly know this saint. He is one of the greatest figures in the Church’s history. He is the protector of journalists and publishers because he himself edited one of the first periodicals. We can describe as “ecumenical” this saint who wrote the Controversies in order to reason clearly and lovingly with the Calvinists of his day. He was a master of the spiritual life and taught Christian perfection for every state of life. In these ways, he was a precursor of the Second Vatican Council. Such lofty ideals are always timely” (D.C., no 14891, p. 386).