In this, the season of preparation for Christmas, an old gift is offered once again! It was 400 years ago this month – more or less – that the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, written by St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), first appeared in print. I say “more or less” because, although the formal designation of “privilege of the king” by which it was able to be published is dated November 1608, the frontispiece of the first edition is stamped 1609. Thus, it likely appeared around the change of the calendar year – hence, the timing of our celebration!

The first edition was soon followed by a second, augmented edition and then by a third (which corrected the omissions in the second). The last, and now definitive, edition appeared in 1619, and serves as the basis for the innumerable translations that soon followed.¹ To give you just a glimpse of how immediate and widespread was the influence of this book, consider that King Charles I issued a proclamation in 1637 in which he ordered “that all copies in England be seized and burned.”² Fortunately for us, the citizenry did not heed the king’s wishes.

I shall not here attempt to summarize for you the content of this Salesian masterpiece. Besides my literary frailty in comparison to its saintly author, attempting to reduce those pages to this small paper would be a grave injustice! You can, and I hope you will, read it for yourselves. Instead, I wish simply to consider five key aspects of this work, in the hope that it will give you a greater appreciation of the text’s literary and theological merits – which, I am told, have made the *Introduction to the Devout Life* one of the top-ten selling books of all time in its field.

¹ In just 50 years after the first edition, there appeared at least 40 reprints and translations into 17 languages.
But, first, let me give you just a taste of what you shall find there. Here is the beginning of St. Francis de Sales’ preface to the *Introduction*:

Almost all those who have hitherto written about devotion have been concerned with instructing persons wholly withdrawn from the world or have at least taught a kind of devotion that leads to such complete retirement. My purpose is to instruct those who live in town, within families, or at court, and by their state of life are obliged to live an ordinary life as to outward appearances. Frequently, on the pretext of some supposed impossibility, they will not even think of undertaking a devout life. It is their opinion that just as no animal dares to taste the seed of the herb called *palma Christi*, so no one should aspire to the palm of Christian piety as long as he is living under the pressure of worldly affairs. I shall show to such men that ... just as the firefly passes through flames without burning its wings, so also a strong, resolute soul can live in the world without being infected by any of its moods, ... and fly through the flames of earthly lusts without burning the wings of its holy desires for a devout life. True, this is a difficult task, and therefore I wish that many souls would strive to accomplish it with greater ardor than has hitherto been shown. Weak as I am, I shall try by this treatise to provide some assistance to those who with a generous heart undertake so worthy a project.

Right from the start you hear a bit of the charm that this book exudes. You see that Francis addresses, in an unabashedly personal way, you “who live in towns” (though he did not know of our land), you who live “within families” (so feel free to share this book with them), you who are “at court” (though he was talking about the royalty) and, we might add today, you who are “in the office” or any other workplace. In other words, he intends to introduce devotion to anyone interested in learning about it and living by it! To those so interested he speaks of plants and fireflies – not the typical subjects of episcopal writings, to be sure. Yet, as we shall expand on later, the imagery he adopts is part of what makes this book such a literary treasure. Most of all, he is calling you to become who you are – as “devout” Christians living in today’s world – and his book tells you just how to do this.

So, what are the five things I think you should know before delving into the text? The first concerns the book’s title – an introduction to a “devout” life. To our ears, that adjective is not particularly endearing. “Devout” in English conjures up the image of the little old lady silently yet feverishly plying the beads of a well-worn rosary, or a pious supplicant kneeling before votive candles and reciting the formularies of a novena in hopes of miraculous intercession. Not that Francis de Sales has anything against the rosary; in fact, he is known to have recited it on a daily basis. And surely this bishop would not be opposed to people praying in Church or elsewhere; in fact, one of the more ingenious chapters (part II: chapter 13) speaks of the “aspirations” by which we can effectively be at prayer even amid the hectic schedules of our day. No, the teaching in this *Introduction* is not about devotion in the commonplace sense of that term. St. Francis de Sales is not exhorting the workers of the

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3 A castor oil plant, now called palmachrist.
4 As documented in Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium*. 
world to be pious. Rather, his sense of “devotion” encompasses the whole of life. The *vie devote* is not a spiritual activity; it is life itself, though one governed by an experience of our faith and lived according to that faith. And because this is a super-natural life, we need to be “introduced” to it. Who better to show us the way than one who knows firsthand what it entails and how living it will be of eternal benefit?

Second, you may be wondering what’s so novel about all of this. In some ways, nothing at all – at least not for readers who have already come to appreciate the Second Vatican Council’s teaching about the “universal call to holiness.” But what you may not know is that the thought of St. Francis de Sales was the basis for this modern teaching. In the saint’s time, there was precious little literature on the subject, so the majority of folks “came to the conclusion that honest living is good enough for ordinary people, and that holiness is reserved for scholars and clergy.” Bishop de Sales took it upon himself to rectify this situation, since in his view “it is primarily the duty of bishops to lead souls to perfection.”

But even worse than the paucity of reading material was the popular mentality that relegated the pursuit of holiness to the “professional” religious people, the monks and nuns who left the secular world behind and sought communion with God on the mountaintop. As you might suspect, a variation of that mind-set remains present still today, in the assumption that religion is a “church” thing, devoid of any particular relevance in the everyday world of the scientific laboratory or the economic marketplace or the political statehouse. It is also evident in the viewpoint that compartmentalizes faith as just one of the multiple aspects of life, along with (and sometimes in competition with) family, career, home, leisure and all those other realities that comprise our own “to do” lists.

For Francis de Sales, however, living devoutly is not contrary to, nor is it in competition with, the demands of everyday existence. To the contrary, his *Introduction to the Devout Life* emphasizes that our own holiness is realized in and through what he calls our “state-in-life.” Holiness is to be infused in anything and everything we do, most especially in the day-to-day responsibilities that our personal vocation entails. To give you an anecdotal example: Francis once received a letter from a mother of several children, who lamented that she was unable to grow in holiness because taking care of those little ones prevented her from getting to Mass every day. The bishop told her not to go to Mass every day! Instead, her holiness was to be found precisely in how she conducted herself as a mom. Now, for a bishop to tell someone not to go to Church may sound rather odd! But the Bishop of Geneva rejects the all-or-nothing attitude of his day (and of ours?) which pits the secular and the sacred against each

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5 POPE PAUL VI, *Sabaudiae Gemma*, Apostolic Letter on the 400th anniversary of the birth of St. Francis de Sales: “No one of the recent Doctors of the Church more than St. Francis de Sales anticipated the deliberations and decisions of the Second Vatican Council with such a keen and progressive insight. He renders his contribution by the example of his life, by the wealth of his true and sound doctrine, by the fact that he has opened and strengthened the spiritual ways of Christian perfection for all states and conditions in life.”


other. Instead, Francis de Sales champions a new kind of flexibility that is essential to the spirituality of the laity, and this approach becomes the hallmark of his humanistic pedagogy.  

St. Francis de Sales developed this flexible approach not only in his own personal growth, but especially through his work in directing others. This leads us to our third consideration, namely, a look at the sources behind the Introduction. You will notice that the author often addresses his thoughts to “Philothea,” as if he were writing directly to this lady. In one sense, he is! “Philothea” is the all-encompassing name he gives to anyone who wishes to be a “lover of God,” and directing his words to this imaginary addressee gives the book its characteristic “atmosphere of informality, of tenderness, of intimacy.”

Specifically, his visualization of a feminine reader reflects the provenance of the book in his letters of spiritual direction, primarily those written to Madame de Charmoisy, a lady residing in Annecy [the picture is where she lived] who had married an ambassador of the Duke of Savoy who also happened to be a distant relative of Francis de Sales. In her deposition for his canonization, she acknowledges that she shared his written instructions to her with a Jesuit priest (Père Jean Fourier), who in turn urged the saint to publish them for a wider audience. This inter-personal reference gives to the saint’s writing not only its eminent practicality but also a distinct efficacy that is grounded in real-life experience. In turn, this gives the Introduction its actuality, even in the present day. As Pope John Paul II says of its author, “Since he was passionately in love with God and man, his attitude to people was fundamentally optimistic and he never failed to invite them, to use his own words, to flourish where they were sown. Still today ... his teaching as a priest and bishop finds an echo in the human heart and has an affinity with the deepest human aspirations.”

That special affinity, however, is somewhat camouflaged by the author’s literary style, and this is my fourth consideration. Be forewarned! St. Francis de Sales brings a mystical inspiration to his writing, and his imaginative flair may not sit well with our twenty-first century mindset. You will find in this book innumerable metaphors and images: some drawn from ordinary life (as that of navigators or archers), others from typical things (like cloths or coals or mirrors or lamps), and most from the world of nature, including various fauna and flora and animals – all of which he saw on a daily basis in his lakeside garden in Annecy or on the backdrop of the Alpine mountains. Admittedly, he sometimes stretches the comparison beyond what natural science knows (as, for instance, when he opines that

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8 Giovanni Maria Bertin, La pedagogia umanistica Europea nei secoli XV e XVI (Milano: Marzorati, 1961), pp. 304-305: “In his work, St. Francis de Sales decisively goes beyond the medieval conception, affirming that virtue is reconcilable with everyday life, not only with that part of life that is occupied with each one’s social functions, but also with that part that is occupied by worldly diversions and customs. ... Thus, there is no intolerance between devotion and worldly life, because the habits that are acquired in the worldly life do not imprison the soul nor (do they) seduce it.”

9 Dom Benedict Mackey, “Préface de l’Edition de 1893,” Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales (Annecy: J, Niérat, 1893), vi: “It is in the character and genius of St. Francis de Sales, it is in his heart, above all, that it is necessary to search for the veritable origin of, and as the elongated preparation for, the Introduction to the Devout Life.”


11 In his own preface (Oeuvres, p. viii), Dom Mackey highlights several other recipients of the saint’s letters of spiritual direction, including Mme. de Chantal, Rose Bourgeois, Mme. Brûlart (Francis’ sister), and Mme. de Villers.

12 The deposition is quoted in Mackey, “Préface,” Oeuvres, p. xiv.

“our heart breathes through the ear” – III:20). But keep in mind that his purpose is always theological. As an historian of this style explains:

In his attempt to make us love the devout life, (St. Francis) draws the majority of his metaphors and illustrations from familiar human experience, and from the natural world. This is no mere concession to the weakness of worldly readers; the saint deeply believes that this world is created by God, and that there are significant parallels between the phenomena of life on earth and the nature of God Himself. We can see in the saint’s metaphors an affectionate enthusiasm for all created things: like God, he loves the world.14

If you have ever had the pleasure of visiting Rome, you will recall the delightful magnificence of Bernini’s architecture in the Piazza San Pietro or his and Borromini’s sculpting in Piazza Navona. Reading the Introduction to the Devout Life offers a similar sensation, if you are open to it, for St. Francis de Sales’ writing gives evidence of a beautifully baroque style. His imagery fuses sense elements and intangible concepts; his comparisons simultaneously unite a naturalistic appreciation of this world with a spiritual fervor for the next world. And his analysis of human development is expressed with the unbridled passion befitting both the eros and agape that constitute human love. Perhaps most characteristic of his baroque style is its multi-sense, multi-aspect approach, through which Francis offers us “a kaleidoscopic series of pictures” that give “a pleasure composed of movement and variety.”15 Emblematic of this is his instruction that each time we pray, we should conclude by gathering up a “spiritual bouquet” (II:7). The same historian of the baroque concludes his study of the Introduction by commenting on this imaginary exercise:

The thought is characteristic, for prayer is represented as an agreeable occupation, comparable to walking in a beautiful garden. Furthermore, piety is compatible with our other activities; it is like a bouquet which we carry with us wherever we go. Then there is the idea of spiritual growth: it is for our advancement in the religious life that we are asked to reconsider at various times during the day our morning meditations. The style is also typical of St. François: spiritual thought assumes such concrete form that the metaphor becomes a landscape. We walk in this garden, we gather flowers in it. Within the landscape, there is movement.

And there is the appeal to several senses: we see the flowers, we pick them, we hold them, (and) we smell them throughout the day. It is perhaps not too much to suggest that St. François views all his images as spiritual flowers; he wants the reader to gather them and to breathe their scent throughout life. In this way the artist will have contributed to our spiritual advancement.¹⁶

With that pleasant little touch of Spring, we must return now to Winter, an off-season best endured by curling up with a good book. So, as a final consideration, we may simply ask: what makes this book such a classic? Its novel presentation of devotion as possible for all? Its personal and practical approach? Its charmingly baroque style? Yes, all of that and so much more!

In this now 400 year-old work is wisdom for your mind and heart and soul. What you will find there are tidbits like these that reflect a treasure of understanding:

Francis reminds us of the many opportunities we have to do good: Occasions do not often present themselves for the exercise of fortitude, magnanimity, and great generosity, but meekness, temperance, integrity, and humility are virtues that must mark all our actions in life (III:1).

He also acknowledges our frustrations: Be patient not only with regard to the big, chief part of the afflictions that may come to you but also as to things accompanying them and accidental circumstances. Many people would be ready to accept evils provided they were not inconvenienced by them (III:3).

This Doctor of the Church encourages discernment about what is valuable in life: A man who can own pearls does not bother about shells, and those who aspire to virtue do not trouble themselves over honors (III:4).

He also helps us to keep it all in perspective: Do mules stop being dull, disgusting beasts simply because they are laden with a prince’s precious, perfumed goods? What good do we possess that we have not received? And if we have received it, why do we glory in it? (III:5)

The saint teaches us about human reality: With the single exception of sin, anxiety is the greatest evil that can happen to a soul (IV:11).

He also teaches us about human frailty! Sometimes it happens that those who imagine themselves to be angels are not even good men ... (III:2).

But what really makes this book a gift of far greater value than its price tag is the fact that here you will find timeless teaching about what matters most to us ... how to live a good life here below so that we might enjoy an eternal life of happiness!

¹⁶ Buffum, Studies in the Baroque, 114.