Every Christian is called to live Jesus. St. Paul gives this vocation its biblical expression in Galatians (2:20): “…and the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me”, and Thomas à Kempis gives as its classical expression the imitation of Christ.

This “living Jesus,” this imitation of Christ must be both continuous and discontinuous with the historical Jesus. It must be continuous with him because his human life among us, in addition to being the full revelation of who God is, is also the final disclosure of the meaning of the human person and of human life as well. The ancient Christology of Antioch insisted on the saving significance of Jesus’ human life in large part because of its disclosure of what is the deepest meaning and flowering of the human person. They understood that it is not we who define what it means to be human. Jesus does. Thus, genuine human existence is realized only in imitation of Jesus in his human life among us.

But continuity can never mean absolute reproduction of his life. His world is not our world. And we are not Jesus. Not only does history go on, but each generation and each person in unique and unrepeatable. Thus there can be no aping of Jesus in his life. Fundamentalism is not permitted the Christian either in orthodoxy or in ortho-praxis. How to be in continuity with Jesus in imitation while being discontinuous with him in situation: that has been the challenge to Christian living through the history of the Church.

The first part of this paper will look at the major lines of Jesus’ life so as to make clear how every Christian in every age can be in continuity with him in imitation. Using an insight from St. Francis de Sales, the second part will suggest how we can concretely bridge the discontinuity which time and space place between the historical Jesus and each Christian. We
will conclude with a few reflections on how these considerations affect certain aspects of religious life.

Jesus understood himself as Son. Almost every page of the New Testament speaks of this. He is from the Father and for the Father. The full and free acceptance of his reality as from and for the Father is what is called by some his Abba experience. Concretely, this Abba experience was translated into a life of obedient sonship wherein he lived out this fundamental experience in active embrace of God’s cause, the kingdom. The Father’s will was Jesus’ cause:

“My doctrine is not my own; it comes from him who sent me” (Jn 7:16).

“I revere my Father…I seek no glory for myself” (Jn 10:15).

“…the Father knows me and I know the Father” (Jn 10:15).

“I solemnly assure you, the Son cannot do anything by himself—he can do only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (Jn 5:19).

Although all these texts are from John’s gospel, they are faithful to the entire New Testament in its proclamation of Jesus’ total dedication to the will, the cause, and the kingdom of his Father. Further, in his sonship lay Jesus’ human fulfillment. His obedience was its climax on the cross, while his human fulfillment saw its completion in resurrection and glorification. But these pivotal experiences of cross, resurrection and glorification must never be seen as separated or separable from the context of his entire human life, every moment of it, lived in creative obedience and filial docility to the Father’s will for him.

A closer look at the New Testament will convincingly suggest that Jesus was concretely Son, totally the Father’s, precisely by being for others in selfless, self-giving love. Jesus’ love for God was expressed in his love for the neighbor in that neighbor’s concrete need. For Jesus knew that God’s cause was the people—all the people, but especially the anawim among them: the oppressed, the poor, the outcast and sinner. Jesus’ ministry among them was God for them. In Jesus’ human kindness, God was taking the side of his people against every concrete manifestation of evil. And in that ministry the kingdom was already dawning.

Thus, Jesus was totally God’s in obedient sonship precisely in his self-less dedication to the concrete needs of the people. Jesus himself lived the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbor and therein realized his love for God’s people which is to be imitated by every Christian throughout history. In that way, continuity with Christ is possible and human fulfillment is genuinely Christian.

Yet, his concrete world is not ours and we are not Jesus. How can this discontinuity with Christ be creatively bridged so that we are able to “put on the mind of Christ” and live his dedication to God and his service to neighbor? How are we to bridge our worlds so as to permit Jesus to live in us? How is he to be available through us in self-less age to this world?
just as he was to his own? The classical and correct answer in Christian spirituality is, of course, the Holy Spirit. But how does it happen in fact? We look to an insight from St. Francis de Sales for a helpful answer.

In Book 11 of his *Treatise on the Love of God* Francis de Sales dedicates a number of chapters (15-20) to what amounts to a suggestive response to the question of just how the Holy Spirit enables every Christian in every age to imitate Jesus. It is a long reflection on a key text from St. Paul: “…the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rm 5:5). The Holy Spirit, in being poured out into the heart of every Christian, is the one gift of charity in which is included what classically are called the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit, together with the eight evangelical beatitudes and all the virtues as well. Important for our consideration is how Francis relates this one gift of the Spirit’s charity to the imitation of Jesus’ human life of double dedication to God and neighbor. He calls the single gift of the Holy Spirit’s charity a new Jacob’s ladder. All the other gifts contained in this gift are simply steps on that ladder leading upward to God and downward to neighbor.

“Thus, Theotimus, charity will be for us another Jacob’s ladder, made up of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as of so many sacred steps. Upon them angelic men will ascend from earth to heaven, to be united to the breast of God almighty and upon them they will descend from heaven to earth to take their neighbor by the hand to lead him to heaven.”

What he says here about the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit is equally true of the fruits, the evangelical beatitudes, and the virtues. All are “sacred steps” on the new Jacob’s ladder, the gift of the Holy Spirit outpoured as charity into the heart of every Christian. Each step leads to both God and neighbor. In another part of the *Treatise*, St. Francis speaks of charity that produces acts of love of God [and] produces at the same time those of love of neighbor. Just as Jacob saw that one and the same ladder touched heaven and earth

…so also we know that one and the same dilection reaches out to cherish both God and neighbor.

…the love of God not only often commands love of neighbor but it produces such love and even pours it into man’s heart as its resemblance and image. Just as man is God’s image, so the sacred love of man for man is the true image of a heavenly love of man for God.

…The culmination of love for the heavenly Father’s divine goodness consists in perfect love of our brothers and companions.

In this understanding, Francis affirms strongly the closest possible linkage within the double commandment of love, echoing thereby Jesus’ own interpretation as found in Mt. 25:40: “I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me.”
Let us step back for a moment to reflect on what is being offered as a Salesian contribution to our question. Francis suggests that we can be in continuity with the human life of Jesus in imitation of his love of God and neighbor because we are gifted, each of us, with that same spirit of charity which was the context and content of his own life. From birth to ministry, in death and resurrection, the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit was alive in his life and work. He was the holy milieu in which Jesus lived out both his obedient sonship and his self-less love of neighbor. And that same spirit is present to each of us, in that same power.

But Jesus’ world is not ours. How are the worlds bridged by this Spirit which we have in common? Francis is especially helpful here. The charity which is the Spirit’s gift to Jesus was, as it were, activated by the concrete needs of the neighbor and the specific will of God for him. Jesus did not love and serve abstractions. He loved and served real people with concrete needs. Blind people were blessed with sight; deaf people with sound; hungry people with food. The same Spirit enabled him to be obediently docile to the concrete will of the Father, embracing that will for him at each moment in his unfolding life and ministry. Jon Sobrino suggests that Jesus had in fact to be quite flexible and adaptable to the various manifestations of his Father’s will for him as these were concretely expressed in the changing circumstances of his ministry. The springtime of his popularity in Galilee, for instance, gave way to mounting and sinister opposition as he neared Jerusalem. Keeping the will and kingdom of his Father in focus in these shifting fortunes, he adjusted and adapted to the exigencies of that will and the demands of that kingdom. Thereby, he remained united to his Father’s love and attentive to the people’s needs throughout his life and in death.

Francis de Sales is simply suggesting that a similar pattern is possible for every Christian. The gift of the Spirit’s charity links our human lives with that of Jesus. The particular manifestations of God’s will for us in the unfolding circumstances of our life and the concrete needs of our neighbor will activate that charity in ways which, though unique for each of us, will, nevertheless, be continuous in spirit with Jesus. That this is the point Francis de Sales wishes to make is clear when he writes that:

These gifts are not only inseparable from charity, but all things being well considered and speaking precisely, they are the principal virtues, properties, and qualities of charity; (1) Wisdom is actually nothing else than the love that relishes, tastes, and experiences how sweet and gentle God is. (2) Understanding is nothing else than love attentive to consider and penetrate the beauty of the truths of faith, therein to know God in himself, and then, descending from this, to consider him in creatures. (3) Science, on the other hand, is simply the same love keeping us attentive to know ourselves and creatures, so as to make us mount up again to a more perfect knowledge of the service we owe to God. (4) Counsel is also love, inasmuch as it renders us careful, attentive, and skilled in choosing the means proper to serving God in a holy manner. (5) Fortitude is love that encourages and animates the heart so as to carry out what counsel has determined must be done. (6) Piety is the love that sweetens labor and makes us with good heart, gratitude, and filial affection do works that please God our
Father. (7) To conclude, fear is simply love inasmuch as it causes us to fly and shun what is displeasing to God’s majesty.

It is immediately after this paragraph that Francis compares charity to Jacob’s ladder, reaching both God and neighbor. Thus, for Francis de Sales, whether the one gift of the Spirit’s charity is expressed as wisdom, understanding, science, counsel, fortitude, piety, fear or any other of countless possible responses towards God or neighbor depends simply on the challenge of the moment as it indicates either God’s will for us or another’s need. Charity is, as it were, ready at hand for the Christian to imitate Jesus’ love of God and neighbor at any moment and under any circumstance. The particular way it will, in fact, be expressed depends solely on the divine will and human need. In all this, Francis de Sales is in continuity with what St. Luke had already suggested as early as the Acts of the Apostles: the Holy Spirit is the divine gift to the Church which enables and empowers every Christian throughout history to be in touch with Jesus. In circumstances very different from his, Christians can nevertheless imitate his love of God and neighbor and thereby live his human life and experience his human fulfillment.

For Francis, then, the purduring and trans-historical principle of living Jesus is the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is God’s love outpoured. Its particular translation into practice in Christian virtue and life is determined by God’s will for each of us (hence the need for discernment) as well as by the concrete needs of our neighbor. This was true for the historical Jesus; it is true for us, and it will remain true throughout history until Christ returns to bring about that heaven in which each person’s glory is the divine will (“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”) and where there will be no more people in need, for “God will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rv 7:17).

Let us conclude by suggesting how these reflections affect certain aspects of religious life. It seems, first of all, that founders of religious orders and congregations were especially in tune with all this. For it can be argued that it was precisely their sensitivity to God’s will as that will came to expression in the concrete needs of the people in their day that prompted them to allow their gift of the spirit’s charity to be expressed in the particular charism of their institute. In doing this, they were imitating the pattern of Jesus’ life but in circumstances very different from his.

What has been suggested might contribute to a theological basis for second career choices among religious. Docility to God’s will as manifested in people’s particular needs might prompt individual religious or entire communities to change their focus in ministry. The particular ministry may change from time to time but its spirit will be constant: “God’s will and the concrete needs of the neighbor.

In one’s daily religious life, Francis de Sales suggests that this gift of the Spirit’s charity is generally activated by the duties of one’s state of life, necessity, the exigencies of the present moment and the particular needs of one’s neighbor.
To conclude, the Salesian appreciation of the role of the Holy Spirit as love outpoured into the heart of each Christian resolves the dilemma of how to be in continuity with Jesus in imitation and yet discontinuous with him in situation. The same Spirit who formed the milieu of his life of obedient sonship and agape love of neighbor is outpoured into every Christian throughout history. God’s will and the concrete needs of the neighbor, though unique to each person and age, will always be the forces which activate that charity into what Francis calls a life which is in continual “ectasy of work and life.” Fulfilling the double commandment of love is how Jesus is imitated in every age and by every Christian. The Holy Spirit is always the enabling gift of that love for each Christian, as he was in the human life of Jesus.