HERITAGE WEEK  
The Legacy of St. Francis de Sales
presented by
The Salesian Center for Faith & Culture
at DeSales University

KEY DATES:

• born at Thorens in Savoy on 21 August 1567  
• ordained to the priesthood in 1593  
• ordained a bishop on 8 December 1602  
• with St. Jane de Chantal, founded the Order of the Visitation in 1610  
• died at Lyons, on 28 December 1622

MAJOR WRITINGS:

• Controversies about the Catholic Faith
• Defense of the Standard of the Cross
• Introduction to the Devout Life
• Treatise on the Love of God
• Spiritual Conferences on religious life
• Sermons
• Letters of spiritual direction

 ECClesiastical Recognitions: 

• beatified by Pope Alexander VII on 8 January 1662  
• canonized by Pope Alexander VII on 19 April 1665  
• declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius IX on 16 November 1871  
• declared heavenly Patron of Writers by Pope Pius XI on 26 January 1923  
• also patron saint of confessors, educators, and the deaf
BISHOP OF GENEVA

On December 8, 1602 Francis de Sales was consecrated Bishop of Geneva. Due to Calvinist nationalism, he resided in Annecy (France). Committed to spreading the teaching of the Council of Trent, he would use his position to educate his diocese in the doctrines of the Church. He preached frequently and became known as a master of sacred eloquence. He organized diocesan synods, reorganized administrative structures, and initiated the practice of parish visitations, twice visiting the entirety of his diocese. He also formed the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) and personally taught catechism classes, even to the point of inventing a type of sign language by which he taught prayers to a young man born deaf (for which he would later be named Patron of the Deaf). He was, without doubt, a very personable pastor beloved by all in his flock.

We find here a lesson for today -- that people come first! It would have been easy for the bishop to avoid the degradations and the complications of diocesan affairs, by removing himself to the safe confines of an episcopal mansion or hiding behind increased layers of bureaucratic structure. But Francis de Sales practiced a very direct and personal "contact" with all the people in his care, commoner and scholar alike, saints and sinners together. And not everything he did was a success. Sometimes even the best-laid plans fail. So be it. He, and we, must move on, confident that the good Lord will provide.

CHRISTIAN HUMANIST

As the eldest of thirteen children raised in a family of nobility, Francis was educated in the finest traditions of humanism and the liberal arts. At the Chappuisien College in Annecy, he began his formal studies at age nine, with an emphasis on learning French language and literature. Having received the sacraments of Communion and Confirmation during this time, Francis also began his life-long devotion to the Church. That devotion was to be tested during his studies at the Clermont College, a Jesuit school in Paris where he was sent in 1578. There he pursued the "arts" of education (the classics, humanities, rhetoric, etc.) and of nobility (horsemanship, fencing, dancing, etc.), learning all that was expected of a young gentleman. But he also undertook, on his own, the study of theology. In 1586, after listening to the learned debates at the Sorbonne on the notion of predestination, Francis found himself mired in a personal "crisis" in which he feared that he would be eternally damned.
Then and there he resolved to serve God completely throughout the whole of his life. For a young man of twenty years, this event was to become the defining moment in his life, one that would color his optimistic vision of the world and influence the hope-filled character of his writings.

What characterizes the education of this saint might well be described as a "natural goodness." Inspired by the beauty of the land around him, Francis would come to realize that the world is essentially good, that all things participate in the beauty and goodness of the Creator, and that human life itself was ordered to this beauty and goodness of God as its ultimate end. In our world today, scientific discoveries and technological breakthroughs reflect the potential of creation. Yet, at the same time, these powerful advances run the risk of fragmenting our lives. The holistic and humanistic education that Francis received, and which he would later promote, serves to remind us of the overarching plan of salvation that God has in store for our world as it waits to be re-born.

**Further Reading** (www.desales.edu/salesian):

- “Francis de Sales, the Galileo Affair, and the Autonomy of Modern Science” by Alexander Pocetto, OSFS
- “Our Lady of Deliverance” by Thomas Dailey, OSFS

**Lawyer & Cathedral Provost**

With a first-rate education, Francis de Sales was admitted to the bar and was nominated a senator by the duke, two steps along the way of a father’s dream that his son embark on a diplomatic career. Yet Francis refused the title. Instead, he was named Provost of the cathedral chapter of Geneva, a quasi-political position that put him second in rank to the local bishop. This appointment may have assuaged his father’s aspirations, but it also signaled to Francis that he should alight upon an ecclesiastical career. To that end, he was ordained to the priesthood at age twenty-six and volunteered for a "missionary" assignment to the region of the Chablais, which by that time had become so thoroughly Calvinist that only about a hundred people, in a population of nearly 25,000, were still Catholic. The force of Protestant policy, which prohibited public interaction with the papist preacher, would prove to be no match for the rhetorical skills of this saint. Francis de Sales re-converted the entire region.
The lesson here is rather clear. Following God’s call takes courage. Following God’s way – the way of perfect charity – takes courage. Francis de Sales’ ecumenical success, and subsequent transformation of an entire culture, depended not on his own oratorical skills or political savvy, helpful though these no doubt were. What counted most, in his becoming who he was to be and in his doing what he was to do, is a sure and certain reliance on the power of God. His achievements may have redounded to his own glory, but his motivation was always and only to do what God willed. If we would but keep this goal in mind, we can be assured that our work cannot, ultimately, fail.

**Patron of Journalists & Writers**

The religious reformation that took place during Francis' time brought with it a confusion over the truths of religion. People of all walks of life were searching for some direction, and Francis was ardently sought after for spiritual counsel. He responded to these spiritual seekers in a simple, yet impressive way. Francis wrote letters — thousands of letters! Because of his hectic schedule as spiritual leader of the diocese, he would often have to steal time in the morning or before bed just to reply to the many queries which the faithful would pose. It is estimated that he wrote over 10,000 such letters, but most have been destroyed. From the letters that are preserved, we get a glimpse of the profound simplicity of this spiritual director. Whether writing to members of religious orders, well-to-do nobles, or even simple laborers, Francis faithfully gave instructions on a wide variety of issues affecting the daily lives of believers: from raising children to fulfilling duties and dealing with death. And it was precisely in the midst of these otherwise mundane affairs that Francis taught his spiritual children to find God. Ever humble and always encouraging, his letters of spiritual direction endeared him to all who sought his wisdom. One of those with whom Francis shared spiritual advice deserves particular mention — Jane de Chantal. Through written correspondence with her, and by means of personal encounters whenever their travels would permit, these two saints entered into a spiritual friendship that would blossom and bear fruit in the living legacy now known as Salesian spirituality.

What his letters of spiritual direction reveal is the "inspired common sense" that Francis had and his keen awareness of the "practical" dimension to holiness. Always drawing on the positive, he was able to teach people to find God wherever they were and to love God in whatever they were doing. Along the way, Francis exemplified the virtues of true spiritual friendship, building relationships that had as their foundation and focus the common desire to love God more and more. In a world where interpersonal relationships so often are superficial or directed only to self-serving aims, Francis' advice and example demonstrate for us the value of relationships centered on divine love.
Doctor of the Church

Francis quickly gained a reputation as a masterful communicator of things spiritual. Among his many writings, two deserve particular mention as spiritual classics.

The first — an *Introduction to the Devout Life* — was published in 1609 and was the forerunner of what the Second Vatican Council would later teach as the "universal call to holiness." This book, addressed to the fictional "Philothea" (a soul loving, or in love with, God), proposes a simple yet at that time revolutionary idea, namely, that devotion is possible in every state and condition of life.

The second work — his *Treatise on the Love of God* — was published in 1616 and is a more far-reaching and thorough attempt at analyzing the workings of divine love in human life. Supported by a sound philosophy and psychology of the human person, and annotated with explanations from the bible and examples from the world of nature, this treatise seeks to spell out in detail the quest for the soul's union with the will of God, as learned through meditation and contemplation. Though not as widely circulated as the *Introduction*, this book and his many other writings constitute a written legacy that can be trusted to lead readers surely and certainly along the way to God.

The popularity of Francis' writing may be attributed to two factors. On the one hand, his instructions on the devout life are filled with great spiritual imagination. Acknowledged as a literary genius in his own right, Francis is able to paint meaning with words and to convey truth through metaphoric language. On the other hand, this imaginative power is clearly directed to a practical end. His writings address the common needs of everyday people, and he teaches them that the profound mysteries of God's love can be appropriated in the virtues of everyday living. In a world today which is inundated with questionable messages carried by film and television, the imaginative writings of Francis de Sales offer a treasure of spiritual wisdom that anyone and everyone can count on.

Further Reading (www.desales.edu/salesian):
- “St. Francis de Sales: Patron of Journalists” by Herbert Winklehner, OSFS
When the Introduction to the Devout Life first appeared (in 1608/1609), it was recognized as a masterpiece of mystical and devotional literature, and for four centuries there has been no dissent from this judgment. Its greatness lies in many things: in its originality, its completeness, its sincerity, its balance, its penetration, and its style. It is one of those rare productions of human genius which are completely successful in what they wish to do.

(From the “Introduction” by John K. Ryan)

“With a particularly voluminous correspondence, [Francis de Sales] also accompanied with great discernment and a gradual pedagogy adapted to each situation, appropriately using highly colored images, the souls who entrusted themselves to his spiritual direction, so that each good act and each victory over sin might be as ‘many precious stones to be set into the crown of glory that God prepares for us in his Paradise’ (Introduction à la Vie dévote, IV, 8). 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, and I am very glad of it, the works of Francis de Sales are part of our classical literature; it is the sign that his teaching as a priest and bishop finds an echo in the human heart and has an affinity with the deepest human aspirations. I invite pastors and faithful to learn from his example and his writings, which are always up to date.”