Deep within, every human being is searching: there is the search of those who, consciously or not seek God, and there is the search of those who, having "found" God in some degree of faith, seek for ways to deepen their contact with the divine in prayer and to live in relationship with God. This is intended as a help in this second search for concrete ways to respond to God, the search for a "spirituality."

Over the centuries Christian preachers and spiritual writers have proposed many ways to respond to the God revealed in Jesus and his gospel. Historically most of the classic Christian spiritualities are products of a life somewhat removed from ordinary life "in the world," and the usual relationships of family, work and politics, and so tend to assume as much withdrawal or solitude as possible. This spirituality "of the desert" or monastic spirituality still speaks to many today; in fact in its various adaptations it continues to exert such a powerful influence that some think it is the only model: to respond more fully to God I must follow Jesus into the desert, spend hours in quiet prayer, do some kind of fasting, get away on a silent retreat as often as possible, and know that in all this I am embarking on a journey "alone with the alone."

As powerfully attractive as the model is, the difficulties of living it in anything but a monastic or solitary setting are evident. How can one find that kind of solitude or that kind of time away when one is raising a family or pursuing a career in business, building, the arts or politics? And if one feels called to the latter in faith, as a matter of vocation, does it mean that one is not called to a deeper spirituality, or at least not now? Or does it mean that God is indeed asking me to do the impossible in my present situation? Or is there another model?

Almost four hundred years ago Francis de Sales (1567-1622) clearly and consciously thought and taught that there are many other models of spirituality, other forms of "devotion" than the monastic or religious-life model. He sought to outline a way people could live God's love fully, with the alacrity and intensity that he called "devotion" within families, in the workplace, even—to use modern equivalents of what he said—in the military or in government. He personally helped such people find ways of living this life through personal spiritual direction and letters, and eventually wrote a book for them, an Introduction to the Devout Life. He also published what has been called a sequel, a Treatise on the Love of God, elaborating the inner workings of that love for God as it grows in human hearts.

The selections contained in this anthology are drawn from these letters and books. The arrangement, the headings, and the rest of this introduction are intended to help twentieth-
century searchers “hear” a seventeenth-century writer – to hear him in a way that offers direction and encouragement in their own search for ways of responding to God.

Some readers may not need these helps, and may go well directly to the texts, but the fact remains that we are dealing with writings as old as Shakespeare’s, and translations of French writings at that. And, these writings, coming from a world quite different from our own, can be understood properly only in that larger and historical context.

There, is to be sure, no lack of contemporary writers who propose ways of responding to God in the very different conditions of today’s world. Since they do not need to be translated from another time or language, some will prefer to read them. At the same time, there is an enrichment to be gained through contact with classic spiritual writings. Whatever the effort required, there is an advantage in reading what not only has survived the passage of centuries, but what has continued to provide spiritual nourishment to countless readers of various eras, cultures, and walks of life. Their testimony has its own weight, as does the approbation of the Roman Catholic Church which has long since declared that Francis de Sales lived a remarkably Christian life – that he is a saint (1665), and he taught that life well, that he is a doctor or teacher of the whole Church (1877).

In any case to introduce the texts themselves I propose to say something about the several worlds in which Francis lived, always with an eye to understanding his life and writings. Then, after listing a few characteristics of his spirituality, I will suggest ways in which that spirituality needs to be completed and inserted in the “worlds” of today.

**Francis de Sales' Worlds**

From several points of view, Francis de Sales occupied a space and time between two worlds, in each of which he was able to be at home, and both of which he was able to integrate within himself. Geographically he lived most of his life in his native Savoy, for centuries an independent duchy which spanned the Alps and included parts of what is now France and Italy. After early education in Savoy, Francis went first to Paris to study the humanities and philosophy, and then to Padua to study law. He thus had many direct and extended experiences of the two cultures which converged in Savoy, as well as of the Church as it existed in either.

Historically Francis lived in a time of enormous cultural and religious transition, a transition from the last breath of the medieval worldview and the clear awakenings of the modern, more specifically in that period between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment that some call the Baroque. In terms of Church history he lived in the period of Roman Catholic revival which had begun in sixteenth-century Italy and Spain, but which, in the heart of Europe where Francis lived, had been enormously affected by the Protestant Reformation. In fact Francis grew up in a staunchly Catholic family in the shadow of Calvin’s Geneva; though he eventually bore the title of Prince and Bishop of Geneva, he was able to visit the city only incognito and at some risk. By his loyalty to the “ancient Church,” its institutions and teachers, he had one foot in the medieval period. At the same time the other foot was clearly in the modern, as is evidenced by his writing an emerging
modern French, by his intuitive psychological insight, and by his anticipation of modern spirituality, as will be seen shortly.

Socially Francis moved easily in many different worlds of his time, notably in two worlds which were increasingly differentiated in his day, the secular and the ecclesiastical. By virtue not only of his formal education but also of his sustained interest in literature, science, diplomacy and civility, Francis was a humanist. At the same time he was, at first by desire and then in fact "of the Church," an expression which in his day meant a cleric, but which can express a deeper belonging which stemmed from his baptism. "This country [Savoy] is my homeland according to my natural birth; according to my spiritual rebirth, my homeland is the Church." That simply did he join the two in himself, differentiating but integrating the two worlds: human and Christian.

In other respects as well, Francis joined disparate worlds in himself, the active and contemplative, lay and religious, indeed the human and the divine, but, since these integrations pertain directly to his spirituality, they will be seen later, under that heading.

Against this very general geographical, historical, social and religious background, I propose to leave the telling of Francis' life story to others and simply to highlight a few facets of it which help explain how he was prepared to live and write as he did.

**Education.** Francis de Sales was ordained a priest at the age of twenty-five and bishop nine years later without ever having been in a seminary. From an early age he knew he wanted to be a priest, but he kept that desire a secret all through the years of his education, confiding it only to his cousin Louis de Sales, to his spiritual director, and at some point to his mother. As a result, at Paris Francis received a thoroughly "lay" education typical for the nobility of his era, and at Padua he studied both civil and canon law as all prospective lawyers did. He did all this, as he said later, "to please my father;" while at the same time, both in Paris and Padua, he studied theology "to please myself." Without questioning Francis' spontaneous interest in theology, one may suppose that he knew such studies were necessary for his goal of ordained ministry. Even more importantly, all through this time he was growing spiritually, through spiritual direction and reading, prayer and religious exercises, and not without crises, both psychological and theological in nature.

Even after receiving his degree in law with great acclaim, Francis was reluctant to ask his aging father's permission to become a priest. He was admitted to the bar in the Savoyard capital of Chambery, but declined not only an arranged marriage but also the offer of a seat in the Senate of Savoy. Finally, at the instigation of his cousin Louis and others, letters arrived from Rome naming Francis Provost of the Cathedral Chapter, a position second to the bishop. With this concession to his father's expectation for an eldest son in hand, Francis approached him and received a magnanimous blessing. Within eight months, he had also received minor orders, diaconate and priesthood, more than satisfying all the requirements.
Is it any wonder, then, that Francis de Sales as priest and bishop could minister so effectively to all classes of people, that in particular, he could understand the situation and direct the hearts of lay people? Or that he would write his *Introduction to the Devout Life* for them and for all who have “to lead an ordinary life to all outward appearances”? He knew from experience what it meant to live an ordinary life while inwardly growing in God’s love and nurturing God’s inspirations.

*Friends.* Francis de Sales had a great personal capacity and a profound appreciation for friendship, seeing both human and divine friendship as that for which we are made.

To all his friendships he brought a heart gifted for love, and by them all—in varying degrees, to be sure—he was enriched and his spirituality was shaped. Whether it was his friendship with Pernette Boutey, a widow with a small business in a village of his diocese, or his friendship with King Henry IV of France, Francis grew through his friendships.

Though he derived much from many, for example, the many spiritual persons he met during a 1602 stay in Paris, he gained even more from his long-term spiritual direction relationships, and uniquely from that with Jane Frances de Chantal. She was a young widow with four small children and an intense desire to give herself totally to God. From their first meeting in 1604, theirs was a graced relationship, and it became one of the great spiritual friendships in Christian history. Shortly after they met, Francis agreed to be her spiritual director; for him, though, spiritual direction was never a one-way street, and when it grew in depth it tended to become a more and more mutual relationship, a true friendship, a grace-filled gift to himself as well as to the other.

Some have exaggerated the influence of his more famous spiritual friends to the point of depicting Francis as the attentive novice doing his studies in the Paris circle, or as a faithful reporter recording the experience of Jane de Chantal in the *Treatise on the Love of God*. In reality he brought much to these encounters, and the exchange was mutual; so much so in the latter case that it is pointless to ask who influenced whom the most.

What is essential is to see that the same Holy Spirit, working primarily in and through Francis’ unique heart and personality, was also inspiring and enriching his spirituality through his relationships with friends, and that, as a result, his life and personality can be understood only in that relational context. This also explains the influence he had on others, both during his lifetime and beyond, a powerful but never over-powering influence which passed from person to person, directly or through his writing. His ability to listen gave him the ability and the language to speak and write in a way that touched hearts. “Say what you will,” he wrote, “lips speak but to ears; heart speaks to heart.” His heart was neither a sponge drawing only from those around him, nor a precious stone, gifted but impervious to others’ gifts. It was rather a constantly pulsating heart center which never ceased drawing in and giving forth God’s love. It was a heart gifted through others, and a heart gifted to share with others.

*Ministry.* Francis’ sense of his own vocation to serve God as an ordained minister serving God’s people, a sense which grew in clarity and strength from his earliest years,
gave a consistent direction to his entire life. One cannot understand him or his spirituality without appreciating that pastoral focus. Alluding to his consecration as bishop, Francis once recounted to his friend Jane a sermon he had given the day before: “I said that it is ten years since I was consecrated, that is, since God took me from myself to take me to himself and give me to his people, which is to say, since God converted me from what I was so that I might be for them.”

So strong was this sense of total consecration that we can say that all his activities were done for God and for the spiritual well being of the people. This became the central criterion he used in deciding how to spend him time and energies. As priest and even more so as bishop, the demands on his time were great. “I don’t think there is a bishop for a hundred miles around who has such an entangled mass of things to do as I have.” Administering and reforming his diocese took much of his time, but priority was given to preaching, celebrating the sacraments, and teaching catechism personally to children.

His pastoral ministry also included the previously mentioned spiritual direction in person and by letter of people in his diocese and beyond. His direction of Jane de Chantal led to his being co-founder with her of the Visitation of Holy Mary. From the beginning Francis saw this community as another way of meeting the spiritual needs of people, and not only those of the women who joined it: the Visitation was to be a community of prayer, but radiating holiness to the whole Church.

It was this same pastoral care that accounts for all of Francis' writings, most of which derived from his direct response to people’s needs, without necessarily being intended for publication. His missionary work as a priest endeavoring to win back to the Catholic faith the Calvinists of the Chablais region prompted him to write short tracts or memoranda "on the Church" and "on the norms of faith," which were posthumously published as The Catholic Controversy. In the same context he himself published a Defense of the Standard of the Cross as a direct retort to Calvinist attacks on Catholic practice.

The first edition of the Introduction to the Devout Life grew out of memoranda on the spiritual life written for individuals, which he was soon persuaded to publish. Its immediate success was so great that Francis saw it as a way of helping more and more people; he expanded it into the form which has become a religious best seller of all time, constantly republished, translated and adapted.

The more than two thousand letters that have come down to us are an obvious record of his pastoral ministry, from administration to spiritual direction, and the four volumes of sermons testify to what he saw as the focus of his ministry as bishop. The Spiritual Conferences are the transcription of familiar instructions and responses he gave to the first members of the Visitation community and were eventually published by them.

One might wonder about the Treatise on the Love of God, which by its title and early sections seems to be a more theoretical work, designed to think through the intricacies of theology and prayer. Granted that it originated in Francis' own desire to tell the story of God's love, and not from any specific pastoral need, still as it developed and took shape it
became a book people were waiting for, a follow-up to the *Introduction*, and every bit as “practical” a book, that is, intended to guide the practice of Christian life and prayer.

For Francis the mystical life is life – everyday life, with events foreseen and unforeseeable, with its sufferings and its joys, its friendships and its separations, its worries and its consolations – natural life but totally penetrated, “soaked through and through” to use his expression, by and in the will of God. . . .

That is how, it seems to us, one must understand the *Treatise on the Love of God*. It is a book about life, about the life of a Christian who wants to sound the depths of faith, but within the actual concrete situations in which that Christian exists in each moment. . . . This *Treatise on the Love of God* is not a book to be used only by contemplatives, no more than it is a book only for activists; the love of God it talks about is situated beyond contemplation as well as beyond activity; it is at the source of both contemplation and action; it is the life of the complete Christian, a life full of love.

This portrait of Francis’ major works bears an unmistakable resemblance to the author’s own active-contemplative life; it shows that even this apparently theoretical work flowed straight from his heart and was inspired by his pastoral care for other hearts seeking the fullness of love in their circumstances and everyday life. It follows that what we have in his writings is a “mysticism in action,” a spirituality encompassing the highest forms of prayer yet lived in a very active life. That is important to know, both for understanding Francis de Sales and for relating his spirituality to busy lives today.

**Characteristics of His Spirituality**

My intent here is neither to summarize nor to select highlights of Salesian spirituality. Either aim might imply that a reading of Francis himself is optional. No, the intent here is to describe some characteristics of Salesian spirituality which will prepare us to approach the texts with a clearer idea of their originality and modernity. These characteristics are not always obvious, but by alerting the reader to them in advance, I hope to facilitate the appreciation of the texts and their content.

**Salesian Spirituality Starts from the Heart and Grows Outward**

This characteristic is consciously and explicitly stated by Francis himself:

As for myself, Philothea, I could never approve the method of those who begin by the exterior such as the bearing, the dress or the hair in order to reform a person. On the contrary, it seems to me that we should begin by the interior: "Convert yourself to me, says God, with your whole heart" (Joel 2:12). "My child, give me your heart" (Proverbs 23:26). As the heart is the source of actions, they are such as the heart is. The divine spouse inviting us says: "Place me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm" (Sg 8:6). Yes, indeed, those who have Jesus Christ in their hearts will have him soon after in all their exterior actions.
I wish, therefore, dear Philothea, to engrave and inscribe on your heart, before everything else, this holy and sacred maxim: Live Jesus! After that, I am sure that your life which comes from your heart . . . will produce all its actions which are its fruits inscribed and engraved with the same word of salvation. Just as the gentle Jesus will live in your heart, he will live also in your conduct and appear in your eyes, in your mouth, in your hands, even in your hair. Then you could say reverently following St. Paul "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). In short, to win a person's heart is to win the whole person.

Ironically this passage introduced a chapter on exterior mortification, and continues with the instruction the heart needs “to form its exterior bearing and conduct.” That context makes clear from the start that, while this spirituality starts with the interior, it does not remain within, but gradually, “organically” as the accompanying imagery suggests, grows into observable behavior, all the while remaining marked by its inner source.

The starting point within is called the “heart.” Lest the understanding of that image be shaped by the connotations attached to that word in current speech or in sentimental piety, it is essential to know what Francis meant by it.

But let us be very careful to give the word heart its Salesian meaning: the heart designated here, as in the Bible, that which is most profound, most inalienable, most personal, most divine in us; it is that mysterious center where each encounters God, acquiesces to his appeals or refused to do so.

Salesian spirituality starts, then, from the deepest core of a person, one’s heart-center, where intellect and will, reason and affections, “head and heart” are seen as one, prior to differentiations that may be legitimate and even necessary. For Francis this is a matter as much of theology as of psychology. It follows from the pouring forth of God’s love “into our hearts,” as St. Paul says, or from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our heart of hearts, which Francis also calls the "supreme point of the soul." It is from that point that all “spiritual life” flows, and from there that all the rest derives meaning and value.

To this point the interiority of Salesian spirituality is not unlike that of the New Testament, or of other efforts to overcome a recurring emphasis on externals in the Christian religion, but it has some consequences that are characteristically Salesian.

1. Because it is a spirituality first and foremost of the heart, Salesian spirituality can be lived in any circumstances or life-style, and it will fit in and improve the circumstances of that life. In this sense it is a "spirituality for all," able to grow from within and adapt itself to any life-style, from that of the busiest business person to that of a contemplative in a monastery. Spiritualities which are built on a particular form of prayer, or around a particular ministry or life-style, by definition cannot have the flexibility of one built on the heart.

2. Because the meaning and value of our actions come from within, they cannot be evaluated from the outside nor according to their seeming importance. Besides, "important
tasks lie seldom in our path; but all day long there are little things we can do so well, if we do them with all our love." Or again, "To serve [God] according to his liking, we must take great care to serve him well in great and lofty matters as well as in the little and the lowly. In fact, we can equally delight his heart both by the one and the other."

Francis' "indifference" to great works, indeed his preference for littleness in works, virtues, life-style, etc., can be misunderstood as though he failed to appreciate the inner greatness of human actions and aspirations. Actually his attitude is partly a consequence of his practical preference for what is at hand over what one might dream about doing some day. The omnipresence of little tasks to be accomplished and little virtues to be practiced is their first advantage. Secondly these everyday opportunities are so ordinary as not to attract attention and hence can be responded to "in secret" as the gospel says (Mt 6:4ff), with less risk of hypocrisy or pride.

But underlying these practical and psychological factors lies Francis' conviction that what gives value and importance to actions, great and small, is the heart from which they flow and the love which expresses itself in them.

That saint, with his draught of cold water for the thirsty traveler—little enough, it seems, his gesture; but so pure his intention, so perfect the kindness, the love, which he puts into what he is doing, that his simple offering becomes a spring of living water to bring him everlasting life.

3. But the hidden life of the heart must be fostered and cultivated; it is not enough to have begun with a conversion of heart once in the past. The life of the heart must constantly be nourished by prayer – some dedicated prayer time daily as well as frequent moments of turning toward God in the midst of activity; and it must find outward expression in living from the heart in God's presence. It is so easy to get caught up in the world around and even the world within (thoughts, emotions, hurts, etc.) that a constantly renewed effort is needed to keep in touch – with one's heart-center. Thus the key question that is asked in an annual review of life in the Introduction is, "how's your heart?" in relation to God, to yourself, your neighbor, etc. Francis trusts, in effect, that "as the heart is the source of actions, they are such as the heart is."

Salesian Spirituality is Relational Spirituality

Francis is very conscious that the heart-center of the Christians for whom he was writing existed in relationships, not only with God, but with many other people who were part of their lives. Monastic spirituality, based on a premise of "flight from the world," taught that solitude and silence were indispensable means to achieving the goal of being "alone with the alone," and often implied that other relationships were either inimical or incidental to one's personal spiritual journey. Even living in community a monk (from monos, meaning one, alone) had but one key relationship, that with the abbot, who in that role spoke for God.
By contrast Francis came to see, in his own experience as well as in that of others, that certain relationships were very much part of the way God works in human hearts, and that for Christians who are called to live "in the world" all relationships are part of their journey to God, and need to be thought of as such. Thus in the Introduction he spoke not only of prayer, sacraments and the virtues, but of friendship, marriage, leisure, social gatherings and of work, on the latter suggesting ways of "managing our affairs with great care but without eagerness or anxiety." It has been noted that the second and final editions of the Introduction gave increased priority and space to the "relational virtues." His letters of spiritual direction insist again and again that one's life situation and relationships are integral to one's relationship with God, and cannot be ignored or neglected in the name of the latter.

The whole range of spiritual friendships which Francis both experienced and wrote about also bear out the relational quality of his spirituality. It raised a question which monastic spirituality didn't have to address, namely how one can love God "with all one's heart, mind and strength" and still love one's spouse, children, friends totally and unreservedly; and what if these loves seem more real than one's love for God? Francis responded to this question in the Treatise by recognizing in everyday human experience different kinds of love which are total and yet compatible, for example, the love of a woman for her child and for her husband. In reference to human love for God, he wrote:

God's love is very willing that we have other loves, and often we can scarcely discern which is the principal love of our heart. . . . It often happens that our heart multiplies much more its acts of affection toward creatures than those toward the Creator. Still holy love does not stop being more excellent than other loves as events make clear when the creature is opposed to the Creator, for then we take the side of holy love and submit to it all our other affections.

The very fact that Francis dealt with such issues both personally and in direction of others shows the intimate connection between love of God and love of others in his spirituality. They are two facets of one love which grows or diminishes in one heart. "It is not that one glimpses God despite the persons around one but that one finds God precisely through and with those persons." Many positive implications of this insight remain to be explored.

In the Midst of Movement Salesian Spirituality Finds Peace

To speak of relationship is to speak of change; the give and take, the ups and downs, the known and unknown in any relationship means that it is never static, but keeps changing, growing or waning, and can never be taken for granted. Likewise to have spoken of a spirituality coming from a hidden heart-center and tending to express itself in action is to have spoken of vital growth and movement, a constant interplay between interior and exterior.

In his Treatise on the Love of God Francis de Sales endeavored to express his spirituality entirely in terms of love, which means distinguishing the many different forms
love takes on. Expressed in his original and somewhat technical vocabulary, they usually came in pairs: love of complacence or of benevolence, affective and effective love, love of conformity and love of submission, with each being necessary in turn, alternating and complementing the other.

This is because Francis saw love in all its forms as movement or activity. Prior to other distinctions, love of complacence and benevolence are compared to breathing in or out, or to a heart constantly expanding and contracting. The distinction between affective love (prayer in all its forms) and effective love (concrete expressions of love in life and activities) also implies a complementary and alternating relationship. Both are necessary; they reinforce one another.

The difference between love of conformity and love of submission corresponds to a necessary distinction Francis saw in the ways God's will is made known to us, either through commandments, counsels and inspirations (the “signified will of God”) or through events, which “once they have happened, show us that God has willed” or at least permitted them to happen. This distinction in turn sets up a dynamic conception in the other,” that is, following God's directives as best one can know them and accepting what is or what happens beyond our control as somehow part of God's loving plan or providence.

In these and other ways Francis de Sales' conception of Christian life is dynamic, filled with movement, change and tension—all of which is typical of Baroque culture and style. At the same time his spirit is one of peace, of balance and equilibrium, and his spirituality proves to be peace-producing. A paradox? Perhaps, but it should be noted that his notion of peace is itself dynamic.

The most advanced union with God in prayer is not static but rather that of a free and gentle movement of the heart, or like an infant at its mother's breast. His notion of Christian life was a balance of prayer and activity, a smooth alternation of the roles of Martha and Mary. His ideal of a person in tune with God's will was one who was equally disposed to follow the signified will with determination and gracefully to accept the will of God's good pleasure contained in the outcome, thus living peacefully "between the one will of God and the other”—in a space which at first might be experienced as tension-filled or even contradictory, but which comes to be embraced by living each moment in God's presence and therefore in peace.

In other words, the peace that Francis' spirituality offers is not an alternative to activity but peace in the midst of activity, and activity in the midst of peace: "The one who can preserve gentleness in the midst of sorrows and sufferings and peace in the midst of the multiplicity and busyness of affairs—that person is almost perfect."

**Salesian Spirituality Today**

These three characteristics, namely, to grow from the heart outward, to embrace one's relationships and work, and to foster inner peace in the midst of activity and busyness,
point both to the uniqueness of Salesian spirituality and to its modernity. To the extent that contemporary culture tends to value personal interiority and authenticity, to appreciate relationships and social contexts, and to seek peace of heart—to that extent this seventeenth-century spirituality will appear surprisingly modern.

At the same time it is important to point out some modern assumptions and awarenesses which are not present in Francis’ writings, because in some major areas the social and religious conditions of his time made implausible if not impossible what the Second Vatican Council has made both possible and central for Catholics, and what many Christians consider necessary to any spirituality today.

A liturgical spirituality, in the sense of a way of Christian living consciously drawn from and nourished by direct participation in the holy mysteries, was hardly a possibility in Francis’ day. The liturgical language itself, and even more, the liturgical rites long since removed from the changing mentality of ordinary people, resulted in a gap between them. Granted that the sublime significance and centrality of the Eucharist, the “sun of the spiritual exercises,” the “center of the Christian religion, the heart of devotion,” was recognized, the way of participating in it was purely a matter of “interior acts,” which could be made by the faithful, as it were, in parallel to what the priest was doing at the altar. In fact, if one could not be present at Mass, the same acts could be made at home. Apart from moments like the reception of communion, which itself was much frequent in those days, Salesian interiority was out of tangible contact with its sacramental source.

Recognizing the limitations imposed on Salesian spirituality by the historical conditions of its origins need not lead to abandoning it. It does point out the need to supplement the historical spirituality with the liturgical realities and spirituality that are so available today. It may be that Salesian interiority, when brought into vital contact with an accessible liturgy, will provide needed heart and soul for faith-filled celebrations.

Something very similar can be said about the role of scripture in Salesian spirituality. Francis consistently urged his directees to focus their prayer on the life, passion and death of Jesus, and to use various meditation books for that purpose. He could not refer them to the New Testament texts themselves, simply because no approved Catholic translation existed at that time. Today the way is open to pray directly from the text of the entire Bible, to draw the “reflections” for meditation from the scriptural words themselves.

Finally the post-Vatican II era has led to an awareness that action for change in the structures of society is an essential and integral part of the Christian gospel and hence of a fully Christian spirituality. The need is increasingly felt for spiritualities which by their own inner logic lead to making a difference for peace and justice in the contemporary world. To look for such a spirituality in Francis de Sales would be both futile and unfair. As a person of his time, he took society and its institutions pretty much as a given. As a person trained in law, he certainly struggled for justice and fairness, but generally within the framework of existing laws and institutions, without imagining that these might be notably changed. Such an awareness would have to wait another two or three centuries.
As part of that picture, the awareness of a human right to religious liberty as the basis for a religiously pluralistic society would have to wait; as kind and tolerant as Francis de Sales was personally to the Huguenots he met, theologically and legally he held that heresy or heretical churches as such had no real rights. Only with the Second Vatican Council would official Catholicism recognize the existing situation of other Christian communities and the universal human right and duty to seek the truth in religious matters.

As a result Christians today have possibilities of open dialogue and cooperation that de Sales could only dream about. His zeal for Christian unity, his manifest love for God and all neighbors, and his spirituality itself (which has always had an appeal among Anglicans and Protestants) may yet contribute to greater unity among diverse Christian people.

In describing each of these areas in which Francis de Sales' spirituality needs to be supplemented and updated, I have suggested ways of doing just that—of inserting that spirituality into today's different awareneses and circumstances. Such insertion promises to be easier for Salesian spirituality than for earlier schools, because it arose on the threshold of the "modern world," and because it was designed largely to be lived in the midst of a changing world.

Furthermore, the very effort of adapting and inserting this spirituality into the world of today is totally in keeping with a key principle of Salesian thinking, with what Francis himself called his "old lesson," so often did he return to it:

Don't sow your desires in someone else's garden; just cultivate your own as best you can; don't long to be other than what you are, but desire to be thoroughly what you are. Direct your thoughts to being very good at that and to bearing the crosses, little or great, that you will find there. Believe me, this is the most important and least understood point to the spiritual life. We all love according to what is our taste; few people like what is according to their duty or to God's liking. What is the use of building castles in Spain when we have to live in France? This is my old lesson... . . .

To come to accept who you are, where you are, what you are, as a reality intended or at least permitted by a loving God who is present to you right where you are now – that is Francis' old lesson, and it can be extended to accepting when you are. People on the threshold of the twenty-first century cannot live in seventeenth century castles or spiritualities. Only by accepting and living the full reality of the world in which God has placed us can we "give honor to the Master Craftsman whose handiwork we are."

Finally it may be helpful to suggest different models and images to express a spirituality adapted for today. Historically the dominant models and images have been those of Jesus in the solitude of the desert, and of disciples called to leave everything to follow him there or to a life of itinerant preaching. Francis has already pointed out many men and women in the Old and New Testaments and in the post-biblical era who lived holy lives in workshops and families, as soldiers and kings. A contemporary spiritual writer, Thomas Green, has suggested another New Testament figure whose brief story offers a striking
contrast to the predominant models with their requirements of leaving all and following Jesus on a journey. It is the story of Zacchaeus, the unlikely one, a wealthy tax-collector, who nevertheless wanted to see Jesus, and found a creative way to do so (Lk 19:1-10). The marvel was that, when Jesus looked up and saw Zacchaeus, he didn’t say, “Follow me,” but rather: “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Jesus invited himself to dinner and went home with Zacchaeus. There the latter expressed his conversion in terms of four-fold restitution to all he had defrauded, and of giving half of what he owned to the poor. Jesus' reply was not, "Half is not good enough!" but rather the solemn declaration, "This day salvation has come to this house."

In many ways Salesian spirituality is one of Jesus coming to our homes—to where we live, work, play and pray. It is built on the dwelling of Jesus at home in our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit and thus enables us to "find" him wherever we are, in what we do, and in the relationships that form our lives. At the base of it all is the desire to "see" Jesus, and a willingness to risk doing something creative about that desire.

In October 1893 the first Oblate of St. Francis de Sales to be assigned to the United States arrived in White Plains, New York; may this 1993 publication help in some small way to mark the beginning of the second century of that presence, and to further the diffusion of St. Francis de Sales’ spirituality throughout North America.

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