I have been much consoled by the letters you have written to me and by seeing that Our Lord has let you taste the beginnings of that tranquility with which, by the help of his grace, we must from now on continue to serve him in the rush and variety of business forced on us by our vocation. I have very great hopes for you because I think I have seen your heart firmly resolved to serve his divine Majesty and this makes me sure that you will be faithful in the exercises of devotion. And if it happens that you often fail because of infirmity you must not be in any way put out; but while hating the offence towards God, you must also cultivate a certain joyful humility which helps you to make a point of seeing and recognizing your misery.

I will tell you briefly what exercises I advise for you; you will see them set out more fully in something else that I wrote. Preparation for the whole day which is done briefly in the morning, mental prayer before dinner, which can take an hour or thereabouts according to your leisure; in the evening, before supper, a short time of recollection during which by way of repetition you will make a few heart-felt aspirations to God on your morning meditation, or some other subject.

During the day and amidst your work, examine yourself as often as you can to see whether your love is not too far engaged in what you are doing, or in some way out of order, and whether your hand is still clasped in that of Our Lord. If you find yourself
harassed beyond measure, calm and quiet your spirit. Imagine how Our Lady calmly used one hand to do what needed doing while she held her Child with her other hand on her other arm, for she held him most carefully.

In times of peace and tranquillity make many acts of meekness, for in this way you will tame your heart and train it to gentleness. Do not stop to fight the small temptations which come your way by contesting them or disputing with them, but simply by turning your heart back to Jesus Christ crucified, as though kissing his side or his feet because you love him.

Do not force yourself too much vocal prayer; and when you are praying and feel your heart carried towards mental prayer always let it follow this attraction freely. And if you were to use mental prayer only, together with the Lord’s prayer, the Hail Mary and the creed that would do perfectly well.

I dedicate myself whole-heartedly to the service of your soul which will henceforward be as dear to me as my own. May Our Lord rule forever, and I am in him your servant,

Francis, Bishop of Geneva

To Madame de la Fléchère

Annecy, 19 May 1608

I remember your telling me how the manifold variety of the things you have to do presses on you; and I told you that this was a real and solid way of acquiring virtue. To have to see to a great variety of things is really a continual martyrdom; for in the same way as those who make a journey in the summer find the flies more troublesome and irritating than the journey itself, so the fact that one has to attend to a great many different sorts of things is in itself more troublesome than the actual load of business.

You need patience, and God will give it to you, I hope, if you make a special point of asking him, and if you make yourself practise it faithfully, preparing yourself for this every morning by particularly applying some point of your meditation to it and making up your mind firmly to keep patient all day every time you feel yourself slipping.

Do not lose any opportunity, however small, of showing sweetness of temper towards everyone. Do not trust in your industry to carry you successfully through all your affairs but only in God’s help; and then rest securely in his care of you, believing that he will do what is best for you, providing that you for your part work diligently and yet without straining. Without straining and gently, I say, for violent effort spoils both your heart and the business in hand, and is not really diligence but rather over-eagerness and agitation.

How soon, Madam, we shall be in the realm of eternity! And then we shall see how little all the affairs of this world amount to and how little it mattered whether they did or did
not succeed; but all the same, now we pursue them as though they were great things. When we were small, how eagerly we put together little bits of tiles and wood and mud to make houses and tiny buildings! And if someone smashed them, how very miserable we were and how we wept; but now we see how very unimportant it all was. One day we shall experience the same thing in heaven when we see that what we clung to in this world was nothing more than a child’s fancy.

I do not want to take away the care which ought to go into all these little tricks and trifles, for God wants us to practise on them in this world, but I do want to take away the ardour and warmth which goes into our caring. Let us carry on with our childish pursuits since we are children, but do not let us take them too seriously. And if someone smashes our little houses and plans, let us not get too agitated, for here too, when evening comes and it is time for us to go to bed, I mean when death comes, all these little houses will be useless: we shall have to leave them and go into our father’s house. See to your affairs faithfully, but be conscious all the time that the affair which matters most is that of your salvation and that of directing your soul’s salvation into the way of true devotion.

Be patient with everyone but especially with yourself; I mean that you should not be troubled about your imperfections and that you should always have courage to pick yourself up afterwards. I am very glad to hear that you start all over again every day: there is no better way of getting there in the end in the spiritual life than always starting all over again and never thinking that you have done enough.

Recommend me to God’s mercy and I pray that this same mercy may make you abound in his holy love.

Your most humble servant,
Francis, Bishop of Geneva

To Madame de la Fléchère

Annecy, 28 May 1608

Madam,

Yes, of course; when you think it will afford you consolation to write to me I should very much like you to do so with all confidence.

We must learn to combine two things: great desire to practise our exercises faithfully and well in what concerns prayer and the virtues, and not being in any way disturbed or troubled or dismayed if we happen to fail; for the first point depends on our fidelity, which should always be complete and should grow from hour to hour; the second depends on our infirmity which we shall never shed during our life here on earth.

My very dear daughter, when we commit a fault, we should examine our heart at once and ask if it has kept intact its resolution of serving God; and I hope it will answer yes,
and that it would rather die a hundred deaths than give up this resolution. Then say to your heart: then why are you faltering now? Why are you such a coward? It will answer: I was taken by surprise and I don’t know how it happened, but I feel so heavy and clumsy now.

Alas, my dear daughter, you must forgive your heart; it has not fallen because it is unfaithful but because it is infirm. So you must correct it gently and peacefully and not make it any angrier or more upset. We ought to speak to it and say, Come now, my heart, come my friend, in the name of God, be of good cheer; let us go on our way, stepping carefully, let us look on high to him who is our help and our God. Alas! Dear daughter, we must be charitable in dealing with our soul, and not treat it roughly while we see that it is not offending wilfully. And this, you see, is an exercise in which we practise humility.

Whatever we do towards our salvation is done in God’s service, for what did Our Lord himself do here on earth except work our salvation? Do not go out of your way to desire warfare but be bravely prepared for it when it comes.

May Our Lord be your strength. I am in him,
Your very affectionate servant,

Francis, Bishop of Geneva
28 May, in haste.

To Madame de la Fléchère

Annecy, 16 July 1608

The most important thing of all is to make sure of having tranquillity, not because it is the mother of contentment but because it is the daughter of the love of God and of our own will’s resignation. Occasions for practising tranquillity come our way every day; for we never lack contradictions, wherever we may be; and when there is no one to contradict us we inflict contrariness on ourselves. O my dear daughter, how holy and pleasing we should be to God if we really knew how to use the occasions for mortifying ourselves which our vocation provides, for they are certainly greater than among religious; the trouble is that we do not make proper use of them as they do.

Look after yourself very carefully while you are pregnant; do not be in the least anxious about keeping yourself to any sort of spiritual exercise, except in a most gentle way. If you get tired of kneeling, sit down; if you have not sufficient concentration to pray for half an hour, then make it a quarter of an hour or even half of that.

I ask you to put yourself in the presence of God and to suffer what pain you have before him. Do not impose force on yourself not to complain, but I would like you to complains to God in a spirit of dependence, as a tender child would speak to its mother; for provided
you do it lovingly, there is no danger in complaining, nor in asking to be healed, nor in changing one’s position and allowing oneself to be helped and relieved. Only do this with love and resignation in the arms of God’s good will.

Do not worry because you are unable to perform acts of virtue as you would like to; for as I have told you, they do not cease to be good even if they are done apathetically and dully and are, as it were, forced. You can only give God what you have got, and in this difficult time you have nothing else to offer. At a time like this, dear daughter, your beloved is as a bundle of myrrh to you; go on pressing him to your heart. “My Beloved is mine and I am his’, he will always be in my heart. Isaias calls him the Man of Sorrows; he loves sorrows and those who suffer. Do not struggle to do a great deal, but dispose yourself to meet your suffering with love.

May God look upon you with favour, Madam, and grant you the more retired kind of life of which you speak. Whether we are ill, or live or die, we belong to God, and nothing will separate us from his holy love, if his grace is with us. Our heart will never have any life except in him and for him, he will be the God of our heart for ever. I shall not cease to beseech this of him, nor to be entirely in him,

Your very affectionate servant,

Francis, Bishop of Geneva