To the Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Ordinaries of France, Switzerland and the Piedmont Region, commemorating the Four-Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Saint Francis de Sales, Doctor of the Church

To Our beloved Sons, Achilles Cardinal Lienart, Bishop of Lille; Maurice Cardinal Feltin, former Archbishop of Paris; Paul Marie Cardinal Richaud, Archbishop of Bordeaux; Joseph Cardinal Lefebvre, Archbishop of Bourges; Joseph Marie Cardinal Martin, Archbishop of Rouen; Jean Cardinal Villot, Archbishop of Lyons; Charles Cardinal Journet; to Our reverend Brothers, Michael Pellegrino, Archbishop of Turin; Francis Charriere, Bishop of Lausanne, Geneva, and Fribourg; Jean Sauvage, Bishop of Annecy, and to Our reverend Brothers, the Archbishops, Bishops, and Ordinaries of France, Switzerland, and the Piedmont Region. Beloved Sons and Reverend Brothers, Paul VI sends Greetings and His Apostolic Blessing.

Fourth Centenary

St. Francis de Sales, the gem of Savoy and Switzerland, is looked upon as the greatest glory of Annecy, a city famous for its mountains, lakes, and countryside, and even more so for the annals of its sacred and civil history. The village of Thorens in the neighboring countryside of Annecy has the privilege of being his birthplace. Since this year marks the four-hundredth anniversary of
his birth it has been decided, and justly so, to honor his memory publicly by various celebrations, convocations, and observances. Our venerable Brother, Jean Sauvage, the Bishop of Annecy, informed Us at the proper time of the forthcoming celebrations. Because of the renown of this saint and the importance of the event, he has also made known his desire to proceed in such a way that as many as possible will come from throughout France and elsewhere to participate in the joyful observances. We praise, admire, and approve everything that this diligent Pastor has proposed. Moreover, following the example of Our predecessor, Pius XI, of happy memory, who honored the three-hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Francis de Sales by writing the encyclical *Rerum Omnium*, We also want to send you this letter, beloved Sons and venerable Brothers, manifesting to everyone Our great interest in the celebrations to be held according to the desires of the Bishop of Annecy. Our wish from this moment is that they be successful. We most willingly write this letter because since Our youth We have held the Bishop of Geneva in high esteem which has only increased with the years. Thus We are happy to contribute to the glory of his name. Therefore, We earnestly encourage you to take this splendid opportunity to honor, knowingly and with reflection and piety, the Doctor of divine love and evangelical gentleness. Our good wishes, anticipating the future, move Us to predict varied and abundant benefits will result.

**His Incomparable Influence**

Certainly in your countries more than elsewhere this holy Doctor of the Church was always "a lamp alight and shining."1 casting the bright rays of his heavenly light on all sides. Even now he provides you with an object of study that becomes richer each day. This is probably so because before all else he was one of your countrymen - beyond Savoy, where he spent the greater part of his life, he labored in Paris, Lyons, Burgundy, Geneva, and Turin. But it is especially true because, having a certain innate bond of kinship with these illustrious nations, he displayed in them in the realm of the Christian life, even with respect to those persons known for their eminent virtue, such an influence that, in his time and afterwards, very few if any are comparable to him. Certainly by the example of his virtue, the prudence of his counsels, the discipline of his asceticism, he was the master of the clergy in France and exerted a great influence on the renewal of the true and pure priestly spirit. His influence was greatly felt by St. Vincent de Paul in the foundation of the Congregation of the Missions and of the Daughters of Charity. By his magnificent authority and the warmth of his spirit, which was said to be almost divine, he helped Pierre de Berulle, St. John Eudes, and John Olier, all three of whom were educators of the French clergy and for whom he was a precursor. Your nations assuredly possess in him an eminent master of great dignity. Esteem for spiritual things, the evaluation of them, as well as the formation of Christian morals find in the Salesian grace the pure salt that is agreeable to them. Now that the cycle of time brings back his memory, will not that memory, while moving us to reflect upon it, pour forth a generous gift of light, warmth, wisdom and gentleness? Certainly it will, and what is even greater, this gift will be suitable, under many aspects, to the needs of the present time.

**His Teaching in Our Time**

The experience of the past and that which can be read about it clearly show that the Ecumenical Councils have produced favorable results both during their sessions and after their conclusion...
when truly holy churchmen and pastors recognized for their virtue devoted themselves to
bringing the statues and decrees of the councils to fulfillment by themselves becoming the living
embodiments of the law which they proposed. That just such men, distinguished by their
holiness, might come forth into the light and before the public eye, is that for which all good men
plead and wait in their hidden desires. Perhaps it will be from your very midst that the dawn of
this brilliant light will come. Whatever happens, one must be confident. We possess a teacher, an
author, a doctor who will help you and many others who share with you the charge of the
episcopal office. He will lead the way and, going before you, will conduct you to true, holy, and
worthwhile accomplishments. We have no doubt that the truth which he teaches when studied as
it ought to be will conquer all. 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. We propose that these
three things be imitated, embraced, and followed.

**His Outstanding Virtue**

When considering the character and form of the virtues of St. Francis de Sales, one hesitates to
attempt to describe them because their nature and principal properties are not immediately
perfectly apparent. One star differs from another, one pearl from another, one tree from another,
because all that is beautiful is distinguished by its appearance. But beauty is manifested in the
most perfect way when a harmonious variety of many beautiful things are gathered together.
Thus in a splendid garden, the shrubs, the trees, and the flowers with their individual scents and
colors glow with beauty. However, the sight is still more beautiful if all the other beautiful things
are completed by a well-balanced and proper arrangement so that the ensemble makes the
beauty, delicacy, and charm of each even more pronounced. In this very way, all the individual
virtues are united in one ensemble by St. Francis de Sales, moving those who contemplate him to
admire and appreciate him. Wherefore, it immediately comes to Our mind to apply to St. Francis
de Sales that which St. Gregory Nazianzus said in a fervent discourse about St. Athanasius: "In
praising Athanasius, I will be praising virtue itself. For speaking of him and praising virtue are
really one and the same thing, for he possessed all the virtues, or more correctly I should say,
still possesses all of them together. For truly all those live in God who lived according to God
even though they have migrated from this life." An acute perception of mind, a solid and clear
reasoning, a penetrating judgment, an almost incredible good will and kindness, a gentle and
loveable suavity of speech and expression, a calm ardor of an ever active spirit, a rare simplicity
of manners, a serene and tranquil peace, an ever firm and secure moderation nevertheless not
separated from strength gentleness emanates from his strength - by which he was accustomed to
love affectionately, and also to take a firm stand in order to achieve what he wished, a lofty
elevation of mind and a love for beauty, wishing to show others the most beneficial goods both
spiritual and cultural, an immense love of souls and a love of God, radiant as the sun, which
surpassed all his other virtues, all of this elevated and increased by the superabundance of divine
graces; such are, along with others like them, the characteristics with which the portrait of St.
Francis de Sales is sketched.

**The Various Forms of His Pastoral Ministry**
Endowed with so many gifts of nature and of grace, he gave himself entirely to the service of the Church and having received a field to cultivate he made it bear fruit by virtue of the great care he bestowed on it. He bore the labors of the pastoral ministry undertaken even amid dangers and perils; he composed works rich in doctrine; he preached and renewed sacred eloquence; he reformed many monasteries that had grown lax in religious observance, and, together with St. Jane de Chantall, with whom he was joined by a bond of spiritual and supernatural friendship, he founded the Institute of the Visitation of Holy Mary. This Institute, blessed by virtue of his care and renown, increased and spread so rapidly by the help of divine grace, that by the time the holy bishop was taken from this place of exile to heaven there were already a large number of foundations throughout the country. He applied all his zeal to cultivating and disseminating holiness, because he thought that by doing so he would be able to greatly help the Church in his own corrupt age. As a result of his endeavor, he left behind an example which would serve future ages as a model and a mirror in which they should continually scrutinize themselves.

Fundamental Points of His Teaching

His teachings, very much in tune with the needs of our time, are just as remarkable as his virtuous life. Here are some particular points which seem to be the more important and constitute the fundamental points of Salesian doctrine. The Church, if it is considered under the historical aspect, can not appear as manifestly holy unless it posses holy priests. The priest, more than any other Christian, is another Christ; his sanctity radiates from Christ, eternal high-priest and perfecter of faith. The priest is also a living sign of the grace of Christ. Honor and devotion to the Virgin Mary, necessary for all the faithful, are especially so for the priest, because independently of other excellent reasons the Virgin Mary appears as the archetype of our love for God, Christ and the Church, and this unique and most gentle Virgin, Mother of Grace and exemplar of all virtues, offers us in an excellent way a model of evangelical perfection.

The Doctor of Divine Love

In the concert of the virtues, Charity occupies the first place, not only because it is of a superior rank, but also because it gives to the other virtues efficiency and harmony, since virtue is the order of love. In man, by a law of God the Creator, the soul commands the body, and among the faculties of the soul, the will, which has love for its king and master, is supreme. By Charity then, when it is resplendent, ardent, and active, we attain the summit of Christian perfection and we are united to God, sovereign good and source of beatitude, and, because God is Charity, we become deiform, participating in a certain way in the divine nature. A fraternal communion assembles us, binds us and joins us to one another in the Body of Christ, the Church in heaven and on earth, in which the cohesive element is found to be Charity. One can reasonably say that the Treatise on the Love of God is substantially contained in this famous definition of Charity: Charity, then, is a love of friendship, a friendship of direction, a direction of preference. This preference is incomparable, supreme and supernatural. It is present in the entire soul like a sun to beautify it by its rays, in all the soul's spiritual faculties to perfect them, and in all its powers to restrain them. But it is present in the will as on its throne, to reside there and make it cherish and love its God above all things. Ah, how happy is that spirit into which this holy dilection has been poured, for all good things come to it in its company. Now it seems We should explain in a few words why St. Francis de Sales appears as a new doctor of the spiritual life quite suited to the
present age. It is not because he breaks the bonds and cords with the preceding centuries that he is called new and modern; on the contrary, his doctrine remains profoundly anchored in the fullness of the faith of the Church, in tradition and in the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, and in the domain of asceticism and mysticism, he shows that he owes not a little to St. Ignatius Loyola, Louis of Granada, St. Teresa of Avila, and indirectly to St. John of the Cross, and finally to the masters of the Italian school. Nevertheless he applied himself to placing the old in a new light; he wisely strove to adapt it to the use and advantage of a new age, and to fashion it harmoniously and tastefully. He also employed the lessons of beauty, thus passing from the true to the good by the path of pure beauty. When still a young man, he was formed in the liberal arts by John Maldonat at Paris, and by Anthony Possevin at Padua and he studied the humanities thoroughly. As a result he united the cult of humanism with the mystical ascent and ardor, and in so doing promoted and developed in himself and in his disciples the varied and harmonious progress of all the faculties of man. Yet he did so in such a way that it can not be said that it is the cult of humanism that suddenly vanishes in the mystic flower, but much rather the love of God, descending from above, which without destroying the powers of nature sublimates them, orders them among themselves with art, and makes them express the divers forms of beauty and perfection of human nature.

The Universal Vocation to Holiness

That is why rather than speak as has been done of devout humanism, it would be better to speak of a Christocentric superhumanism, applied to the total holiness of man. And since We have thus touched upon the subject of holiness, it is apropos at this moment to treat briefly the opinion, which ought to be done away with once and for all, of those who hold that true holiness, that which the Church proposes, does not concern all those who profess the Christian religion but is prescribed and suitable only to some isolated individuals or those bound by the profession of religious vows. This old error would reappear in the hidden or openly displayed artifices of some who, themselves confused and confusing others, falsely distinguish Christian perfection from evangelical perfection and posit an absurd difference among the acts of charity of religious, priests, and laity, or by their false interpretations twist the meaning of the decrees of the recent Ecumenical Council, in which it has been clearly established and declared that it is greatly desirable that the ensemble of the faithful including the laity strive wholeheartedly for holiness of life since they are capable of attaining it with the help of divine grace. The Bishop of Geneva presents this variety of the forms of holiness under the name and quality of devotion. The love of God, "when it has attained that degree of perfection in which it causes us to act not only well, but carefully, frequently, and promptly, is called devotion." St. Francis de Sales, enflamed by the violence of a holy desire, urgently exhorted and aroused all Christians regardless of differences of sex, age, fortune, or condition in life, to cultivate and reap the fruits of this devotion. Holiness is not the prerogative of one group or of another or of any one person, but an invitation and a command addressed to all those who bear the name of Christian. "Friend, go up higher." All are bound to ascend the mountain of the Lord, although not by one and the same path. The practice of devotion must differ for the gentleman and the artisan, the servant and the prince, for the widow, young girl or wife. Further, it must be accommodated to their particular strength, circumstances, and duties. Is the solitary life of a Carthusian suited to a bishop? Should those who are married practice the poverty of a Capuchin? If workmen spent as much time in church as religious, if religious were exposed to the same pastoral calls as a bishop, such devotion would
be ridiculous and cause intolerable disorder. True devotion, Philothea, never causes harm, but rather perfects everything we do; a devotion which conflicts with anyone's state of life is undoubtedly false. On this subject it is good to consider another of the saint's profound thoughts. He interprets in an allegorical fashion the command given by God to the earth "to produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants, and fruit trees bearing fruit, each according to its kind." We know from experience that plants and fruit trees have not reached full growth and maturity until they have brought forth seeds and pods that serve to raise up other trees and plants of the same kind. Our virtues never come to full stature and maturity until they beget in us desires for progress, which, like spiritual seeds, serve for the production of new degrees of virtue. I think that that earth which is our heart has been commanded to bring forth plants of virtue bearing the fruits of holy works, "each one after its kind," and having as seeds, desires and plans of ever multiplying and advancing in perfection. A virtue that does not produce the seed or kernel of such desires has not yet come to its full growth and maturity.

The Spirit of Ecumenism

In its Decree on Ecumenism, the Council has stated: It is, of course, essential that doctrine be clearly presented in its entirety. Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false conciliatory approach which harms the purity of Catholic doctrine and obscures its assured genuine meaning. Furthermore, Catholic theologians engaged in ecumenical dialogue, while standing fast by the teaching of the Church and searching together with separated brethren into the divine mysteries, should act with love for truth, with charity, and with humility. In the conversations he fostered with Christians of another confession, St. Francis de Sales anticipated by several centuries our time and our practices. His method and his manner of acting are for us a vivid light and an example to be imitated. In him the highest sanctity was united to the greatest affability and good will. Free of all aggressiveness in discussion, he loved those who had gone astray, while he corrected their errors. For his diversity was not a version: he approached light with another light. Persistent in love, prayer, and the concern to enlighten, he knew how to wait a long time. He knew how to lead gradually to the fullness of truth those who had wandered from it, from that truth from which one can not wander and which no one has the power to diminish. What result and success did he have? By his efforts in the Chablais alone 72,000 came back to communion with the Apostolic See.

Model for Writers and Journalists

Even more than the art of dialogue, he had a remarkable talent for writing. The books which he wrote are marked with an authentic wealth of doctrine, a profundity of thought, a natural beauty adorned with grace! That which he treats proceeds with measure: he pleases, instructs, moves in the highest degree. When he writes, the reader has but one fear, as did the listener when he was preaching: it is that he will finish much too soon. His language possesses that quality which is an outstanding value of this art - an undecaying immortality, which Pindar cleverly expressed: "If a man has expressed something well, it will echo down through the ages, for the influence of great works is immortal, making its way across every land and sea." He was made the heavenly patron of Catholic writers and journalists in order to instruct them by his example, urge them by his authority never to allow themselves to be swayed by the enticements of monetary rewards nor to be deceived by prejudiced opinions, but possessed with the spirit of Christ, adhering to the
truth with simplicity and honesty, to exercise their function for the common good, and in this way to deserve well of the Catholic religion which they serve. If they act in this way, they will obey in a praise worthy manner the Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication (ch. 14) of Vatican Council II, and will not miserably betray the hope, filled with expectation, that has been placed in them.

**His Doctrine on the Church**

There would be one remarkable trait missing in the portrait of the holy Bishop of Geneva if one passed over in silence the excellence and wealth of his doctrine on the Church, its mystery, greatness, nature, and authority. How zealous was his respect for the mother and mistress of the Churches where the doctrine of truth is rooted in the chair of unity a praise moreover which is common to all the saints how filled with submission to her was he in his assiduous and loveable zeal. He explained so clearly what the foundations of the Church are and where they are to be found that his doctrine seems quite useful for interpreting and developing the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* of the Ecumenical Council. From among the many other points which can be read but which we omit here, we retain this: Our Lord is foundation and founder, foundation without other foundation, foundation of the natural, Mosaic and Evangelic Church, foundation perpetual and immortal, foundation of the militant and triumphant, foundation by his own nature, foundation of our faith, hope, and charity, and of the efficacy of the Sacraments. St. Peter is foundation, not founder of the whole Church; foundation but founded on another foundation, which is Our Lord; foundation of the evangelic Church alone, foundation subject to succession, foundation of the militant not of the triumphant, foundation by participation, ministerial...not lord, and in no way the foundation of our faith, hope, and charity, nor of the efficacy of the Sacraments .... But in authority and government St. Peter precedes all the others as much as the head surpasses the members; for he has been appointed ordinary pastor and supreme head of the Church, the others have been delegated pastors entrusted with as full power and authority over all the rest of the Church as St. Peter, except that St. Peter was the head of them all and their pastor as of all Christendom. Thus they were foundations of the Church equally with him as to the conversion of souls and as to doctrine; but as to the authority of governing, they were so unequally, as St. Peter was the ordinary head not only of the rest of the whole Church but of the Apostles also. For Our Lord had built on him the whole of his Church, of which they were not only parts but the principal and noble parts.13 The comparison which St. Francis de Sales establishes between Abraham and St. Peter is also worthy of being weighed, intelligently examined, and profoundly considered. Each was a rock, each a father of believers, that is, of a posterity, which is the recompense for faith in Christ, to the one promised to be as numerous as the sands of the sea and the stars shining in the heavens, and to the other as an immense flock of lambs and sheep. But if Abraham was so called because he was to be the father of many nations, so the same can be said of St. Peter because upon him as upon a strong rock, the multitude of Christians was to be founded: by this comparison, St. Bernard called the office of St. Peter the Patriarchate of Abraham.14 May these prayerful thoughts, these designs of a Christian life, and this will to affirm the plenitude of the Catholic faith, be by virtue of your diligence that which enriches the solemnities planned for the four-hundredth anniversary of the birth of St. Francis de Sales. By the reciprocating character of the Communion of Saints, this great Doctor will respond to your homage with the patronage of his merits and the aid of his merciful and efficacious intercession before God. May this very wise director of souls obtain for
you the meekness and gentleness of our Divine Redeemer, who has taught us to be meek and humble of heart and has promised us that, if we are such, we will possess the earth. May the doctor of the spiritual ways lead numerous followers on the noble and right paths which he has made easy by his apt counsels. May he enflame the fire of charity and the zeal for the salvation of souls, teaching those who honor him not to love in words and speech but in deed and truth. May he help those who belong to the episcopal order of which he is the glory and exemplar in the faithful discharge of their duty May he watch over with loving vigilance the Institute of the Visitation, which he founded. May he keep under his affectionate and attentive protection the Salesian family of St. John Bosco and others who have sought from him the principles and forms of the spiritual life. May he obtain for Catholic writers and journalists and move them to desire an honest conscience and good faith to seek the truth and to come as close to it as possible. May he by his salutary intercession show his favor to Annecy and to Savoy, his birthplace, and obtain for them a resplendent renewal of the piety of former times. May he obtain by the power of his prayer an increase of light and evangelical peace for Geneva, his episcopal seat, for Switzerland, and for the Piedmont Region. Finally for all those who in his honor take part in the celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary may he obtain a growth in "the tree of the desire of sanctity," in accord with that which he desires in his letters of direction. Finally for everyone may his intercession obtain the best gifts in abundance. While We greatly desire that St. Francis de Sales, according to his own custom and manner, may also be a guide for Us amid so many difficult and unforeseen preoccupations in the accomplishment of Our ministry which demands honesty, firmness, and gentleness, We most affectionately bestow on you, beloved Sons and venerable Brothers, for yourselves and for your clergy and the people confided to your direction, Our Apostolic Blessing, sign and pledge of the gentle effusion of heavenly grace.

*Given at Rome in St. Peter's, January 29, 1967, the fourth year of Our Pontificate.*

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**NOTES**

1. John 5:35.


