As a young lad of twelve years old, Francis de Sales was sent off to school by his parents. Accompanied only by his cousins and their tutor, they traveled from the south of France, where they encountered along the way the scars of many wars. The grand cities of Lyons, Bourges and Orleans, and the cathedrals in them, had suffered the desecration of invading armies. When they arrived in the environs of Paris, Francis took his place at the Jesuit school at Clermont, a bastion of papism at the time, where the medieval gargoyles on the façades of the buildings suggested an eerie, yet certain, sense of refuge and security.

(For a detailed account of Francis' years of study at Clermont College, click here).

Though centuries apart and separated by an ocean, the scene of this young student is not all that different from life on campus today. The students who come to Center Valley have been sent here, away from their families for a time, but entrusted to the university's faculty, administration, and staff. As their tutors, it is we, perhaps more than any other adult in their lives, that they will long remember when looking back on their own histories. Along the way, they may not pass cathedrals destroyed by war, but they cannot help but see places of worship that we know are increasingly more empty. Still they come. They come to this peaceful place where they will develop and form themselves in the transition to their adult lives. They come to this serene valley to find stability in a changing, often times troubled, world. They come to this university, it seems, to get an education. But, they really come, and are sent here, in search of hope.
In search of his own education and vocational development, the young Francis was to spend several years in Paris (1578-1588). There he encountered first-hand the ways of the world. Life at the court of high society in Paris was everything you might well imagine! For the youth of that time, it presented a throng of new and sometimes wild experiences. Followers of the courtly life were known to "sing the pleasures of drinking, hunting, and loving."(1) In this scene, remember, Francis is not yet a glorified saint; he is but a teenager, and by all accounts, quite a handsome one, who had his fair share of admiring young women.

Francis undertook his studies in a curriculum informed by the Humanism of his time. His professors no longer limited themselves to teaching the abstract and calculated logic of medieval literature; instead, they read the more colorful and life-like teachings of the ancients. In this way, the young Francis was subjected to a host of classical writings, whose pagan influence exalted a life lived according to nature not grace, a life of worldly elegance and passionate action unencumbered by the challenges of religious asceticism. Surely, his mother did not bring him up to think or live this way!

Then, when he strolled over to the Sorbonne to take in a few lectures in Theology, he found yet another contrast. On the one hand, he sat through raging disputations on the theory of pre-destination in which, it seemed, God was free to decide who among us was to suffer the pangs of eternal damnation. On the other hand, Francis also heard the wise and learned lectures of Gilbert Génébrard,(2) a famous theologian who spoke about the biblical Canticle of Canticles and their portrayal of God as joining with humanity in the historical unfolding of the eternal story of love. Now the poor lad was thoroughly confused!

This brings us to the key event. It took place, by common consensus, over a six-week period from December 1586 to January 1587, when Francis was only nineteen years old. It would be, for all intents and purposes, the lowest point in his life. For at this time, the young Francis was forced to acknowledge and confess the weakness of flesh that he so painfully felt. He knew all too well the temptations that life in Paris offered, even to the point of being tricked by his companions into visiting a house of ill repute. He knew all too well his own temperament, with its flashes of anger, as evidenced in more than one sword fight which he joined. He knew all too well that the pious exercises and scrupulous penances he practiced were of no real use, because the gnawing reality of his own human desires would not give way to his craving for holiness.

And thus he fell into a deep despair. As St. Jane de Chantal later testified during the inquiry for his canonization, the young Francis "was tried by a state of extreme mental anguish. This made him go cold with fear, especially when he thought of how the damned have no power to love God or to see the Blessed Virgin."(3) In fact, he became convinced, in mind and heart and soul, that he, too, was among the number destined for hell. And this conviction became an obsession. Fixated on the idea "of being for all eternity the enemy of God,"(4) he was unable to eat or to sleep with any regularity.

Then it happened. As was his custom when returning to his residence after classes, he stopped in to the Church of St. Etienne-des-grès. There, kneeling in desperate prayer before the statue of the Black Madonna, Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance, he spoke thus:
Whatever may happen, O God, you who hold all things in your hand, whose ways are justice and truth, whatsoever you may have decreed concerning me in the eternal secret of your predestination and reprobation, you whose judgments are unfathomable, you who are ever Just Judge and Merciful Father, I will love you always, O Lord, at least in this life! At least in this life will I love you, if it is not given me to love you in eternity!(5)

Then he dutifully recited the "Memorare" in its entirety. And when he finished praying, the crisis was over, the despair had passed, the obsession had subsided. As St. Jane recounts, "His troubles, so it seemed to him, had fallen about his feet like a leper's scales."(6) Thereafter, he promised he would pray the Rosary daily.

(For the text of the Memorare attributed to St. Francis de Sales, click here.)

It is hard to judge what actually caused such a traumatic event in Francis' young life. It may have been physical fatigue, the energy of his many youthful endeavors finally wearing him out. It may have been intellectual consternation, the theological debates just not sitting well with him. It may have been a psychological complex, his naturally high anxiety yielding its destructive force on his delicate conscience. Whatever the cause, this crisis would prove to be a spiritual "conversion" for Francis. As one of his biographers proclaims: "he overcame his 'saintly craving' for God by transcending it completely."(7) No longer would he seek holiness in the naïveté of romantic fervor; instead, he realizes that whatever good he can muster, and whatever bad he might suffer, are far and away surpassed by the mercy of God.

(For a recent lecture on Francis' pursuit of truth during his studies in Paris and Padua, click here.)

As a result of this defining moment, Francis changes -- both inwardly and outwardly. On the inside, he now knows sympathy and can "relate" to others who suffer in a similar way. On the outside, he takes up a life of service to others in response to the merciful example of the Son of God, who came not to be served but to serve. But all of this, and the volumes of writing about the spiritual life that would follow in his later years, all of this is built on hope, on an experiential optimism that exalts the goodness of life, not as a result of human accomplishment, or even the worthiness of human nature, but as the very real effect of a true understanding of divine mercy.

May all who visit the statue of Our Lady of Deliverance and seek her heavenly intercession find mercy for their minds, hope for their hearts, and solace for their souls.

2. Francis refers to these lectures in his *Treatise on the Love of God*, book XI, chapter 11.


