Another Francis has influenced Pope Francis

Nearly two years since the beginning of the pontificate of Francis, and beyond the opinion of his performance, his person, and obedience—each one will make his own judgment—it is clear that he is treated as an enigmatic Pope, who is difficult to predict and even at times apparently contradictory. Some think that this is due to his being a Jesuit, for which the popular concept is that it is difficult to know what a Jesuit thinks.

When Mario Bergoglio was elected Pope in March 2013 many wrote about the importance of the choice of his papal name, Francis. Commentators insisted that it symbolized his debt to the
ideals of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Francis Xavier, the famous missionary Jesuit. And even he himself explained the choice of the name for his profound veneration of St. Francis of Assisi.

But to the majority, a third Francis may have been overlooked: St Francis de Sales (1567-1622), a great master of spirituality, Doctor of the Church and Bishop of Geneva.

This hidden link in the spirituality of Pope Francis allows us to understand many things about what he is doing today, because we can find its logic in the life and in the teachings of St. Francis de Sales. We can point out 6 things on which St. Francis de Sales has influenced Pope Francis.

Six Points in which Pope Francis and St. Francis de Sales Agree

1-Reform is Central
St. Francis de Sales studied theology and worked as a priest and preacher in the wake of the Council of Trent. Reform was in the air; they were trying to recover the spiritual sources of faith, and eliminate the source of scandal from within. DeSales called this the “cut of the aqueducts.” In the same way, Francis shows reform. Nevertheless, for the two men, reform has not been primarily a political thing: it is a constant fight for the Church to be salt of the earth and light of the world.

2-Simplicity triumphs Polemics
When St. Francis de Sale became Bishop of Geneva, almost all of his flock was Protestant. In place of participating in polemics against his protestant brothers, he opted for emphasizing simplicity in the heart of the Catholic faith, without shying away from controversies or compromising Catholic teaching, and he adopted a style of preaching that was generous, respectful, and understandable.

His most famous declaration about this new style was “You attract more flies with a drop of honey that a barrel of vinegar.”
The decision of Francis for simplicity of the Christian life in order to tackle hot topics continues this idea to the letter of the law.

3-Leaders ought to be gentle
DeSales was, as his most famous follower, St. Alphonsus María de Liguori noted, a master of meekness.

In his famous *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609), DeSales shows himself as a sensitive shepherd who takes serious human fragility, warning against severity and rigor in the shepherding (rejecting, in particular, Jansenist severity).

Gentleness, for DeSales as for Pope Francis, does not signify an attitude of indifferent mercy, but just the opposite: that is to say, the practice of corporal and spiritual works of mercy which the majority of Catholics, may not even remember.

4-Marriage is a Christian Vocation
DeSales articulates in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* that the main objective of matrimony is mutual and gentle companionship for the good of spiritual transformation. Nevertheless, 100 years after his death these words were censured when the Church was criticized by the Jansenists for having made lax their vision of matrimony.

Francis’ decision of calling together a Synod on the Family is a clear sign that he also sees marriage as a central piece in the teaching of the Church.

5-Collaboration with the methods of communication is useful
St. Francis de Sales is the patron of writers and journalists for the fine way he wrote about the faith in his writings and spread this even among the Protestants.

Francis is also a journalistic missionary of the same type, in the spirit of Benedict XVI, who pioneered a Twitter account in the office of his Pontificate.

But it is Francis who began using social media to reach millions of Catholics and non-Catholics. His simple spiritual counsel is perfectly appropriate for the Twitter generation.

6-A Sense of Mission
And lastly, the common thread through almost all of what these two men of the Church have said and written is that of mission in a moment of turmoil.

Both have realized that a self-referential church that does not achieve a dynamic way of going beyond the pews, is condemned to disappear.

Francis, then is a man who tries to embody the best that St. Francis of Assis, St. Francis of Xavier, and St. Francis de Sales offered, three holy giants of the Middle Ages and Modernity who worked tirelessly to bring men and women to Christ.
But there is more besides these points. The way in which DeSales focused his mission in Switzerland makes us recall the way Jorge Bergoglio acted in the beginning of his priesthood in Argentina and acts now as Pope.

**The Vocation of Francis de Sales**

The Protestant reform was at its height throughout Europe. Entire towns, entire provinces, had fallen to the heresies. Mortal lives were lost, families destroyed, destruction, as much physical as spiritual. It was a war for souls and God sent a warrior of the most incredible type.

St. Francis de Sales was the firstborn son of rich French nobles. He was handsome and well educated, skillful in fencing, equestrianism, and dance, a nice combination for which the aristocracy were welcomed in all the right houses. He was being groomed to become a lawyer and his lessons were going well.

Then, one night, when Francis was 18 years old, he attended a theological discussion about predestination. The concept shook the soul of the young man, filling him with such fear and repugnance that during the next two years his desperation made him physically ill, at times so sick that he actually stayed reclined in bed.

At last, with the last bit of his effort and will, he dragged himself to an old Parisian parish, and prayed the Memorare in front of an image of Our Lady of Good Deliverance. From this very moment, never again did he lose the hope of the love of God for all people, nor their good plans for their children, and DeSales undertook to God with a vow of chastity.

The people around DeSales began to ask if he considered a vocation to the priesthood. The local bishop asked him personally, but DeSales remained tranquil about the topic. He desired that
the will of God be unquestionably clear before he embark on the road to priesthood, and wanted an undeniable sign.

The sign came a day later while DeSales was riding. A consummate horseman, nevertheless he was thrown from his horse three times. And even more notable was the fact that each time that he fell, his scabbard and sword were thrown to the ground in the form of a cross. Taking this as the clear sign of the will of God for which he was waiting, DeSales then embarked on the seminary, received sacred orders, and began his life as a priest.

The Mission of Fr. DeSales in Switzerland

Initially, things did not go well. The faithful felt that Fr. DeSales was making fun of them in his homilies, and several people informed the bishop that this noble priest was controlling and egocentric.

In view of this said problem, it occurred to DeSales an unthinkable plan B. He would try a missionary trip to Switzerland, where he would try to convert the 60,000 people who had fallen under Calvinist control. With nothing more than his faith and his cousin, whom they pressured to accompany him, DeSales was asking to enter the predestination which had terrorized him so profoundly.

The bishop agreed, though he had no money to support DeSales, nor would his own father finance the mission. Without losing heart, DeSales travels to Switzerland, where he was received with a door slammed in his face and an intent to assassinate him.

When there was no straw for sleeping, DeSales slept in a tree, tying himself down so that he did not fall during the night and be consumed by the beasts. One night, the temperatures fell so severely that the priest discovered when he woke, that in fact a limb had been frozen and had to be cut.
For the next three years, things continued similarly. Three years and not a single conversion. This type of situation can incite some to violence and others to thrown in the towel. Francis de Sales did not do either of them. Instead, he took up the pen. He wrote his sermons which he put under the doors of the town hostels, confiding in God to work in their hearts.

Little by little relations thawed. The children of the town were permitted to play with DeSales, and the parents, upon seeing with what tenderness the priest interacted with the smallest, they took careful steps towards conversing with the priest.

When DeSales left Switzerland, his kindness and patience had helped some 40,000 people return to the sacraments.

In these days of noise, instantaneous gratification and violence disguised by ideological fervor, we need the intercession of St. Francis DeSales more than ever. We need his example of patience and gentleness and his total belief in the perfect love of God.

His counsel of “retreating at several times to the solitude of your own heart, even while exteriorly you are striking up conversations with others, and speak with God” is the perfect tonic for this present information era, and his warning about “being an angel in prayer and a beast in relations with people is to go lame in both legs.”