The word “mantra” is familiar to us. St. Francis de Sales had never heard this word, but he definitely had his own “mantra”. His “mantra” was “LIVE JESUS”. It was not a mere maxim. It was rather a prayer, a prayer leading to action. He himself gives us its full form at the end of his dedicatory prayer in the Introduction to the Devout Life: “LIVE JESUS. LIVE JESUS. Yes, Lord Jesus, live and reign in our hearts for ever and ever. Amen!”

As a young man, studying law as well as theology at the University of Padua, Francis made Jesus the centre of his life. His purpose then was “Live Jesus” in his own heart. Later, from the time he was ordained a Priest, his purpose was to extend “Live Jesus” in the hearts of all the people.

The ministry of St. Francis de Sales, as a Priest and as a Bishop can be seen as a constant effort to free people from sin and worldliness and lead them to devotion, to holiness, to a joyful living of the Christian life; indeed to “Live Jesus” in their lives.

1. **Francis gave great importance to preaching and to administering the sacrament of penance and reconciliation.**
(1) As a newly-ordained priest, Francis preached often—so much so that his father complained that he was making sermons common place. Francis preached often, not to make himself known as a great preacher, but to tough people’s hearts, to make them repent and to draw them closer to God. Later on, giving advice about preaching, he wrote: “When people leave the church after a sermon, they should not be saying, ‘What a fine preacher! What a clever man!’ On the contrary, their comments should be, ‘How sorry I should be for my sins! How good God is!’ The only real proof of the preacher’s success a person can give after being greatly impressed by a sermon is the practical tribute of a better life.”  

(2) One of the first things St. Francis did after his ordination was to shift the confessional, with the Bishop’s permission, from inside the Cathedral to the entrance on the left where it still remains. People could reach the confessional without any embarrassment. St. Jane de Chantal tells us that Francis spent many hours in the confessional, especially on Sundays and feast days. 

Lajeunie writes: “There [in the confessional] conversion took place…There the Saint reacted keenly against the routine and trivial repetition of the same sins with no effective contrition…If we wish to understand the extraordinary efficaciousness of his apostolate, we must examine him in his confessional; he gave it life-long priority.”

2. **St. Francis as a bishop took great interest in giving Spiritual Guidance to individual persons in all walks of life.**

In 1604, Bishop Francis preached the Lenten sermons at Dijon. As a result, Madame de Chantal and two of her friends placed themselves under his spiritual guidance. The two friends were sisters. The elder sister was Marie Brulart, the wife of the President of the Parliament of Burgundy; the younger sister was Rose Bourgeois, the Abbess of a Benedictine monastery.

In 1608, after preaching the Lenten sermons at Rumilly, his cousin, Madeleine de la Flechere took him for her spiritual director.

St. Francis wrote long letters of spiritual guidance to those whose spiritual director he had agreed to be. Soon he was faced with a problem. There were hardly any suitable books on spirituality he could recommend to them. Towards the end of 1607, in a letter to Madame Brulart., he gives his evaluation of the various spiritual books available at the time. Here is what he writes; “You can read with profit the books of Mother Theresa of Avila, and of St. Catherine of Siena; also “A Method to Serve God”, “A Summary of Christian Perfection” and “The Gospel Pearl”…These books, the “Method” and “Christian Perfection” and “Pearl” are very difficult to understand since they follow a path along the mountain peaks. Do not waste your time with them. Read and re-read ‘The Spiritual Combat’. Make it your dear book; it is clear and can be fully put into practice.”.
Dom Benedict Mackey, the English Benedictine scholar and recognized authority on St. Francis de Sales—the one responsible for editing the first 12 volumes of his writings in the French Annecy Edition—points out that the three books, which St. Francis considered “very difficult to understand”, were works of high spirituality in fashion at the time. He also mentions that “at the beginning of the 17th century, introductory books on spirituality were scarce.”

The situation is very well described by Abbe Hamon, in his biography of St. Francis de Sales. He writes: “At this time ecclesiastical writers had not yet undertaken—at any rate, in France—the publication of clear and practical books to guide along the way of perfection those men and women who were engaged in the occupations of ordinary family life…it resulted from this that the great crowds of people living in the worlds were deprived of guidance suitable to their needs, and were persuaded to believe that the life of perfection was incompatible with the domestic life of the laity.”

To make up for the lack of suitable books on spirituality, St. Francis began writing articles on spiritual topics and circulating them among those he was directing. In a letter dated 9th October 1604, to the Abbess Rose Bourgeois, he writes: “I am sending you a writing regarding what seems to me the easiest and most useful method of making mental prayer…I want you to pass it on to Madame Brulart, your sister, and to Madame de Chantal. I think it will be helpful to them.” On 13th October 1604, he writes to Madame Brulart: “You will receive the method of prayer which I have sent to your sister. Please make a copy of it and use it.” And on 14th October 1604, he writes to Madame de Chantal: “In the morning, make your meditation as I have indicated in the writing I am sending for this purpose.”

These “writings” are closely connected with the publication of the “Introduction”. St. Francis de Sales tells us in the Preface, what led him to publish the book. Here is what he writes: “it is not through my own choice or desire that this “Introduction” is being published. A very respectable and virtuous person asked me for special help with regard to the devout life…I took great care to instruct her thoroughly. So I led her through various spiritual exercises suited to her purpose and her condition in life. About these I gave her written notes so that she could refer to them when needed. Later, she showed these notes to a learned and devout religious. He made an earnest request that I get them published as he was of the opinion that many would find them very helpful. He easily convinced me about this…In order to make the whole work more useful, I have revised the notes to ensure some kind of continuity, adding a number of counsels and instructions relevant to my purpose.” The “very respectable and virtuous person” to whom Bishop Francis gave written notes to has been identified as Madame Louise de Charmoisy, and the “learned and devout religious”, by whom he was persuaded to publish the notes in book form, as the Jesuit, Fr. Jean Fourier.

“Introduction” was first published in December 1608. Already in February 1609, St. Francis wrote to Madame de Chantal: “Bring me all the letters and articles I have sent you, if you have them still. In case the ‘Introduction’ has to be reprinted, these will be a great help, as I shall find there many things for this purpose.” The second edition of the
“Introduction” came out in September 1609. The “Notice to the Reader” in the second edition stated that it was “enlarged by several chapters as well as important things.” In fact, it was a complete revision of the first edition. The 3 parts of the first edition were restructured into the 5 parts of the present edition.

And what does St. Francis de Sales have in mind as he places his “Introduction to the Devout Life” in our hands? Nothing else than to help us to realize his mantra, “LIVE JESUS”. This is what he says: “Those who deal with rural agricultural matters assure us that, if some word is written on an almond seed that is quite entire and out back in its shell carefully, and properly closed, and thus planted, then every fruit which the tree produces will have the same word written and engraved on it… I wish, therefore to engrave and inscribe on your hear, before everything else, this holy and sacred maxim: LIVE JESUS. After that, I am sure your life which comes from your heart, like the almond tree from its kernel, will produce all its actions which are its fruits inscribed and engraved with the same word of salvation. Just as this gentle Jesus will live in your heart, he will also live 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 in me’ (Gal. 2:20).”

References:
6. A.E., Vol. 4, pp. viii-ix
8. A.E., Vol. 12, pp. 333
11. *Introduction* (details as in 1. above), pp. 26-27
13. A.E., Vol. 4, p. 2
15. *Introduction* (details as in 1. above), p. 207