Vive Jésus!

Saint Francis de Sales’

*Introduction to the Devout Life*

and the Universal Call to Holiness

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There are saints among us. But we often fail to recognize them... We invoke them as though they were all in heaven and able to bestow on us only invisible and supernatural favors. It would seem to be a presumption on our part to imitate them... It seems ridiculous that someone whom we have seen and touched, whose weaknesses, foibles and faults we have observed, whose life has been involved in our life and whose brow was adorned by no halo, should have trod the path of holiness before our eyes without our having any inkling of it... We must learn to recognize the saints who live beside us and even the saint who is within us. The least movement of love is enough to reveal the saint in us and in others... It is courage that makes the saint; and courage is no more than confidence in grace that comes from on high and is always available.

-- Louis Lavelle, *The Meaning of Holiness*

Vive Jésus!

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What does a saint look like? Is it someone we can see through the windows of our eyes? Still more, is it someone we can possibly recognize mirrored in our own souls?

Occasionally, we will hear someone say, “She was a saint,” but we’re more likely to hear, “He was no saint,” or say with a shrug, “I’m not a saint.” Saints, it seems, are extraordinary people who, for the most part, lived long ago and were graced with special divine favors that the majority of us neither possess nor comprehend. We admire and venerate them, but their alabaster perfection is obviously far removed from us. Rather, our sentiments may echo the words of Simon Peter: “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

Becoming a saint, it seems, is frightening because it demands the impossible, or at least suggests unimaginable suffering. Perhaps, we bargain, it is sufficient simply to be a “good person,” and even go to church, without the bother of aspiring toward the unrealistic ideal of saintliness. Underlying this fear is the false belief that “becoming holy is something we painfully

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1 Luke 5:8 (New American Bible—and following, unless noted otherwise).
accomplish rather than something that Christ rejoices to accomplish in us.”\(^2\) While holiness does require human cooperation, it is *God who works in us*\(^3\) to bestow saintliness. The servants are summoned to fill the jars with water, but it is Christ who changes the water into wine.\(^4\) “Holiness is neither the simple result of human effort nor is it the automatic result of a ‘grace’ from out of the blue. A combination of both is needed: God’s gratuitous gift and free human cooperation with that gift.”\(^5\)

And for this reason, Jesus did not heed Simon Peter’s request to depart from his sinfulness. Instead, he replied, “Do not be afraid.”\(^6\) Our assurance as baptized Christians is the same: Do not be afraid to strive for holiness, to become saints, because that is what you are, what you are created to be. You have only to realize it. This call to saintliness, to holiness, is nothing other than the perfection of charity,\(^7\) to love as God loves. It is our fundamental vocation, inherent to our very being as children created by God in God’s image. To be fruitful externally, it must first be sown internally—something God does *for* us. “Love the Lord, your God, will all your heart,” God commands.\(^8\) This “is not too mysterious and remote for you… No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out.”\(^9\)

This promise is perfectly fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, the true vine, from whom we, as branches, are given life and fruitfulness according to the New Testament image of the

\(^2\) Plaushin, “St. Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life,*” 27.
\(^3\) cf. Philippians 2:13; Ephesians 3:20.
\(^5\) Corrignan, “The Universal Call to Holiness,” 3.
\(^7\) Pope John Paul II, *Christifidelis Laici,* 16.
\(^8\) Deuteronomy 6:5.
\(^9\) Ibid., 30:11, 14.
“I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.”

So, we are meant to be saints, to be holy—each and every one of us. Since God, who is love, wills all to be saved, he sent his Son, who beckons us: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls.” Becoming a saint means coming to Jesus and, as he says, learning from him to be gentle and humble of heart like his heart. In doing so, nature is gradually perfected into charity, and typically without spiritual heroics. This charity is to be cultivated and carried out daily, sanctifying the ordinary events, duties, and relationships in whatever one’s state of life.

When we allow the heart of Jesus to speak to our hearts in this way, we learn to love the Lord, our God, with all our heart, and we discover that holiness is not too mysterious and remote for us. It is something very near, already in our mouths and hearts. We have only to carry it out, to externalize it, to become what we possess (and possesses us) in our hearts. With the name of Jesus engraved on our hearts, we “allow that name to become one’s own true name, to allow one’s entire self—body, thoughts, affections, actions, decisions, work, devotion—to be animated by the reality of the person known by that name.”

In other words, becoming a saint means: Vive Jésus! – Live Jesus!

10 Pope John Paul II, Christifidelis Laici, 9.
11 John 15:5.
12 cf. 1Timothy 2:4; 1John 4:16.
14 de Sales and de Chantal, (Wright and Power, O.S.F.S.), Letters of Spiritual Direction, 10.
Heart to heart: Holiness and St. Francis de Sales

“Live Jesus!” was the spiritual maxim of Francis de Sales (1567-1622), a nobleman of Savoy, which was an independent state in the Alpine border region of what is now southeastern France, northwestern Italy, and southwestern Switzerland. From 1602 until his death in 1622, he was the bishop of Geneva, though his episcopal see was located just to the south in Annecy near his hometown of Thorens because Geneva was a Calvinist stronghold. And he is a saint, having been canonized in 1665 by Pope Alexander VII, declared a doctor of the Universal Church in 1877 by Pope Pius IX, and confirmed as patron saint of writers in 1923 by Pope Pius XI.

Long recognized for wisdom that has been termed “inspired common sense”\textsuperscript{15} St. Francis de Sales headed his thousands of letters of spiritual direction with the mantra “Vive Jésus!” and he opened and closed his most well-known work, \textit{Introduction to the Devout Life}, with the same call. Sanctity, he emphasized time and again in varied ways, is for \textit{everyone}, and it is not something distinct from day-to-day life, but is \textit{lived} through each moment and encounter. The message he conveys—one that has been commonly referred to as “the universal call to holiness” since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s—is thoroughly rooted in the Gospel and the tradition of the Church. However, this integral teaching bore repeating in the early 17\textsuperscript{th} Century because the concept had largely been either distorted or discarded. In similar fashion, it bears repeating today.

With this in mind, this paper will examine how \textit{Introduction to the Devout Life}, written long before the Second Vatican Council, applies to the modern Church’s renewed emphasis on the “universal call to holiness.” We will do this chiefly by studying how Francis lived this call

himself. We will consider how his own life experiences shaped the outlook that he passed on to others, and how his manner of teaching aided the Church’s continuing effort to develop the concept of the universal call to holiness.

“Vive Jésus!” was more than a rallying cry for Francis. Rather, it succinctly expresses a profound, Gospel-based, and incarnational theology that was (oddly) countercultural during his time, even within many corners of the Church. Sanctity, he maintained, involves a radical change of heart that gradually transforms one from within, “rather than a change of lifestyle effected from without.”16 By taking to heart the Word made Flesh through Jesus’ gift of self, we give flesh to the Word in our daily circumstances by practicing the perfection of charity.

Francis’ pastoral focus as a bishop was on inspiring and directing the individual soul toward the love of God within the particular circumstances of his or her life. One’s interior transformation in Christ is what brings about the Kingdom of God on a universal scale. In other words, we each need to “Live Jesus” first and foremost. His emphasis was always on an interior life lived heart-to-heart with Jesus through our baptismal call, and which then moved outward to be expressed in actions motivated by the love of God.17

In addition, his concern for the soul’s intentional pursuit of holiness was adapted to the particular person he was addressing, “taking into account her or his life responsibilities, temperament, strength, and ability.”18 His heart-to-heart exhortation to “Live Jesus!” extended even (or especially) to the intimate manner in which he expressed it. No one of his many letters of spiritual direction is identical to another. Francis speaks with “eminent practicality” and

16 Wright, Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life, 36.
18 Wright, “Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life” (Christian Spirituality), 237.
“distinct efficacy”\(^{19}\) to each addressee as with a friend. Even his *Introduction to the Devout Life* and his later, more sophisticated *Treatise on the Love of God* are addressed, respectively, to feminine and masculine terms for “Lover of God”—Philothea and Theotimus, as if he were writing to a particular person.\(^{20}\) In all his writings, he conveys sound theology rooted in a prayerful heart and keen intellect, along with consistent firmness. However, he does so in a conversational manner with ease, warmth, and humor. He also exhibits a great deal of psychological insight, compassion, and optimism. “The reader senses that he/she is spoken to, that here is someone who would in a very clear way help him/her to live the faith.”\(^{21}\)

Commentators agree that this personal, heart-to-heart approach was thoroughly authentic to his very being and his pastoral outlook, and is what has endeared him to so many “Philotheas” over the last four centuries. In his 1967 apostolic letter on the 400\(^{th}\) anniversary of Francis’ birth, Pope Paul VI gathered together a composite portrait of the saint, noting that he exhibited:

> An acute perception of mind, a solid and clear reasoning, a penetrating judgment, an almost incredible good will and kindness, a gentle and lovable 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.\(^{22}\)

Like Jesus, Francis de Sales met people where they were, and he lived the incarnational theology that he promoted. He authentically lived Jesus through his particular state in life and day-to-day duties, providing a living example of responding to the universal call to holiness. No analysis of his writings can ignore his very intimate, Christocentric approach because that is what makes them so powerfully engaging. That is what makes what he says relevant today—he

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\(^{20}\) With deft humor, in his preface to the *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis explains his effort to be fair to both sexes, and notes that the spirits of both Philothea and Theotimus dwell within all souls—male or female!


\(^{22}\) Pope Paul VI, *Sabaudiae Gemma*. 
was a human being who became a saint through God working in him. Some of his plans failed. He disappointed his father, who wanted him to become a lawyer and marry well like any self-respecting nobleman. He experienced numerous trials—physical, emotional, and spiritual. Not everyone liked or agreed with him. Early in his career when he almost single-handedly converted 70,000 Calvinists in the mountainous Chablais region through sheer determination, ingenious pamphleteering, and the attraction of his personality, he was often ignored, harassed, and threatened. Attempts were made on his life. His episcopacy burdened him with many duties, and he practically worked himself to death at the relatively young age of 55. Yet with all this, he was first and foremost concerned with the individual souls entrusted to his care in the Diocese of Geneva—to lead them on the way to sainthood. He was truly the shepherd who sought the one lost sheep out of 100.

As we shall see, the writings of Francis de Sales arose from his own life experiences, and they personally addressed the issue and person at hand. “Francis’ great impact was as a person and as a writer of personal letters of direction; his whole spirituality is indissolubly linked, not so much with a body of argued doctrine, as with the wholly individual manner and method of his direction and writing.”

People of God: Called from the beginning to be holy

Before taking a closer look at the life and writings of Francis de Sales, it is necessary to briefly sketch the development of the universal call to holiness. The emphasis that the modern Church—since the Second Vatican Council—places on every Christian’s fundamental vocation

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24 Ibid., 156; de la Bedoyere, SaintMaker, 96; Dailey, “The ‘Real’ Story on St. Francis de Sales.”  
25 de la Bedoyere, SaintMaker, 66.  
26 Stopp, “François de Sales,” (The Study of Spirituality), 380, emphasis added.
has unfolded over time. However, the universal call to holiness is an ancient concept extending beyond the budding of Christianity; it finds its fullest expression in Christ and his Church, which in its entirety is called to be a sacrament to the world. All God’s people, the lay faithful just as much as clergy and religious, are called by Christ to be holy, to be saints, within the context of their family lives, work, and civic responsibilities, but primarily through who they are—not merely by what they do. By becoming saints through faithfully living their baptismal call, all Christians are called to live in the world and transform it in light of the Kingdom of God. And they do this by being who they truly are in their everyday lives—People of God.

The fact that all God’s people are called to sanctity has been overlooked through much of the Church’s history, particularly with the rise of religious orders and the gradual but largely exclusive (not to mention erroneous) identification of holiness with those who took formal vows. However, every Christian has the need for, right to, and obligation of fostering a life-transforming relationship with God rooted in prayer. All are called to such a relationship, though each in different ways. This concept is rooted in God’s creation of humanity.

**Scriptural Foundation**

“God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.” God is holy, and since he created humanity in his own divine image, then he intended for his people to be holy as well, to share in his holiness. This gift was subsequently disfigured by the Fall, but God has spent the intervening millennia attempting to woo us back, to restore our holiness. This is not humanly possible, but is made so by God’s grace. Yet, it is grace we must be open to accept, and then be willing to live each day. It is for this purpose that God

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27 Genesis 1:27; emphasis added.
gives us the Church in Jesus Christ. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity mystically incorporates us into his Body through baptism, and restores our original dignity by taking on our disfigurement, crucifying it, and transfiguring it in the light of the Resurrection. By his wounds, we have been healed.\textsuperscript{28}

With this knowledge, we are encouraged by Sacred Scripture through the Church’s tradition of prayer, the sacraments, and the practice of virtue to “put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth.”\textsuperscript{29} Scripture points the way to this call from the outset. “I, the Lord, am your God; and you shall make and keep yourselves holy, because I am holy,” God told the ancient Israelites through Moses and Aaron. “Since I, the Lord, brought you up from the land of Egypt that I might be your God, you shall be holy, because I am holy… Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.”\textsuperscript{30}

In the New Testament, Jesus is equally clear: “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect,” he says during his Sermon on the Mount.\textsuperscript{31} It is useful to note that this exhortation in Matthew’s Gospel directly follows the Beatitudes, the similes of salt and light, and his teachings on anger, retaliation, and love of enemies. Afterward, he follows it up with instructions on almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, divine providence, and forbearance. He was providing his followers with specific instructions on how to be holy, how to learn from him and be meek and humble in heart, how to live as he lived. Holiness (or perfection), he was saying, is gained

\textsuperscript{28} cf. 1Peter 2:24.  
\textsuperscript{29} Ephesians 4:24.  
\textsuperscript{30} Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2.  
\textsuperscript{31} Matthew 5:48.
through mercy (or the perfection of charity). Elsewhere, Jesus draws this connection by phrasing his command: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

The letters of St. Paul and other writers in the New Testament carried this message forward for the benefit of the early Church. A close reading of Paul’s letters will reveal that he often addresses his readers as the “holy ones” or those “called to be holy.”

A good number of translations use the term “saints” instead. Our holiness or saintliness is willed by God, who in Christ “sanctifies” us—or makes us holy. “As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves,” the First Letter of Peter reminds us. While being made holy, or sanctified, by God’s grace occurs through baptism, the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that in cooperation with that grace, we must “strive” for “that holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

God, who wishes us to share his holiness, makes us holy himself through Christ, but we have to live it—to live Jesus, who is one with the Father. In this way we share in the sanctifying mission of Christ as “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own.”

France in the 16th and 17th centuries

From the early days of the Church, the Word of God, the celebration of the Eucharist, the prayers of the liturgy, and the canonization of holy men and women have helped demonstrate

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33 i.e., Romans 1:7 and 1Corinthians 1:2.
34 cf. 1Thessalonians 4:3.
36 1Peter 1:15.
37 cf. 1Corinthians 6:11.
38 Hebrews 12:14.
40 cf. John 17:11.
41 1Peter 2:9.
that holiness is an obligation for every baptized Christian and is made possible by God’s grace.\textsuperscript{42} Many of the early Church fathers confirmed this--among them St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory the Great, and St. Augustine.\textsuperscript{43} Nevertheless, throughout much of the Church’s history, the universal call to holiness has not been a prominent teaching for the “ordinary” Christian.\textsuperscript{44} With the advent and development of religious orders, a seeming dichotomy gradually grew between those who took formal religious vows and the lay faithful. This was particularly the case with the rise of monasticism (ironically, a lay movement of sorts initially). Monks and virgins became the models of Christian perfection, and by the Middle Ages, spirituality for the (largely uneducated) lay faithful had become synonymous with simply keeping the commandments.\textsuperscript{45}

Perceived distinctions in the kinds and degrees of holiness began to be significantly challenged during the Protestant Reformation and its aftermath. The Church in Europe, and especially France, during the Counter-Reformation underwent a profound renewal.\textsuperscript{46} Increased literacy and availability of printed books and other materials had a significant impact on the average citizen’s life in the Church. A number of devotional works began to be circulated among the lay faithful for the first time in the vernacular, and laity and clergy alike hungered for spiritual nourishment and engagement that had hitherto been lacking.\textsuperscript{47}

Yves Congar, the French Dominican theologian (and influential contributor at Vatican II), argues that this period contributed to a necessary crisis of sorts in the Church. In retrospect,

\textsuperscript{43} New Catholic Encyclopedia, 414. (St. Augustine [354-430], for example, says in Sermon 96 that holiness “is not a command for virgins to obey and brides to ignore, for widows and not for married women, for monks and not for married men, or for the clergy and not for the laity. No, the whole Church, the entire body, all the members in their distinct and varied functions, must follow Christ.”)
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., Vol. 7, s.v. “Universal Call to Holiness,” 5.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., Vol. 8, s.v. “Lay Spirituality,” 414.
\textsuperscript{46} de Sales and de Chantal, (Wright and Power, O.S.F.S.), Letters of Spiritual Direction, 24.
he says, it can be viewed as the infancy of the modern movement to inspire and cultivate a spirituality of holiness for the laity. Its steady progression, he says, was not possible until the last few centuries:

The Middle Ages were too taken up with thoughts of heaven to be able to attach much value to engagement in this present life. The Church militant, and the Empire itself, were seen principally as representing the Church triumphant and the heavenly order. Hagiography particularly... put forward the example of a holiness that consisted of unusual actions, strange to ordinary life and sometimes in contradiction with it, and strongly marked by asceticism. Until the modern age, the Church was not properly and fully in a position to inspire and foster a lay holiness. It is true that this aspect of holiness was never wholly absent, but Christians as a whole looked to a monastic spirituality and shared after a fashion in the monastic state.  

Within the ecclesiastical turmoil of the Counter-Reformation in late 16th and early 17th Century France, the biblical call to holiness for all “had in practice become considerably narrowed in scope.” At that time, there were generally four schools of thought either already circulating or just taking form:

- Becoming holy requires withdrawing from the world and entering a cloister.
- Perfectly sufficient is the “easy devotion” of faith alone (divorced from reason, which could not come to the knowledge of God), according to the controversial but popular thought of the Catholic humanist and philosopher Pierre Charron (*De la Sagesse*, 1601)
- Holiness is reserved for the contemplative elite.
- Holiness is for everyone, a concept influenced by Spanish and Italian thinkers, and inspired to a large degree by the likes of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the Spanish Dominican Louis of Granada (1504-1588), and Lorenzo Scupoli (1530-1610), an Italian Theatine who was the author of *Spiritual Combat*. These three near-contemporaries had an enormous impact on the life and spiritual development of Francis de Sales.

Hovering over all this at the time were the two extremes of Jansenism and Quietism.

“Overwhelmed with a guilt-ridden mentality, and further depressed by an extreme doctrine of

50 Ravier, S.J., *Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint*, 178 (All bulleted items here refer to same).
predestination, the Jansenists lived under a cloud of fear, unable to perceive the loving mercy of God… The Quietists, at the other extreme, placed too much emphasis on God’s mercy and the ability of the human individual to achieve a high degree of holiness.”

It was into this milieu that Francis de Sales was born in 1567.

**The Second Vatican Council’s *Lumen Gentium***

Holiness, says contemporary theologian Benoit-Dominique de La Soujeole, O.P., is “the reception of this mystery of grace [the Church], which configures us to Christ.” The Second Vatican Council took up and developed precisely this theme in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, promulgated in 1964. To date, *Lumen Gentium* stands as the Church’s most contemporary and comprehensive expression of the universal call to holiness, one that is indelibly linked with the mystery of the Body of Christ. The Church as the Body of Christ is made holy by Christ himself, yet is comprised of sinners who share in the mystery of salvation for all humanity.

The very structure and title of *Lumen Gentium*—Light of the Nations—bear out this theme. The first chapter of the document focuses on “The Mystery of the Church,” beginning with the words: “Christ is the light of humanity” who, through the proclamation of the Gospel, “shines out visibly from the Church” as a sign and instrument of salvation. This emphasis on the light of Christ emanating from his Body the Church is scriptural. It was foretold by the

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52 de La Soujeole, O.P., “The Universal Call to Holiness,” 52. (Other helpful post-conciliar documents and/or commentaries regarding the themes of *Lumen Gentium* include *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, *Christifideles Laici*, *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives, Twenty-five Years After*, and *Vatican II: The Constitution on the Church, A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*. Please see bibliography.)
53 *Lumen Gentium*, 1.
prophets\textsuperscript{54} and announced by the Gospels.\textsuperscript{55} It was proclaimed by Jesus, who said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”\textsuperscript{56} Significantly, he says this not only of himself, but of his followers: “You are the light of the world.”\textsuperscript{57}

The Spirit that God bestows upon us in Christ through baptism configures us to his Body, as St. Paul says: “In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.”\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Lumen Gentium}, in its opening chapter, quotes this and many passages from St. Paul’s letters, noting that while we are one in Christ, we are also diverse.\textsuperscript{59} Referring to 1Corinthians 12:12, \textit{Lumen Gentium} states: “As all the members of the human body, though they are many, form one body, so also are the faithful in Christ. Also, in the building up of Christ’s body there is engaged a diversity of members and functions.”\textsuperscript{60}

In other words, there is one holiness—the perfection of charity\textsuperscript{61}—to which \textit{all} the faithful are called by the Church, though there are different vocational paths through which it is pursued and degrees to which it is effected. While “everyone does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless, all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God. And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ.”\textsuperscript{62} This ecclesiology

\begin{footnotes}
\item[56] John 8:12.
\item[57] Matthew 5:14.
\item[58] 1Corinthians 12:13.
\item[59] cf. Ephesians 4:4-13.
\item[60] \textit{Lumen Gentium}, 7.
\item[61] cf. Ibid., 14.
\item[62] Ibid., 32.
\end{footnotes}
of unity and diversity is reflected even in how *Lumen Gentium* is organized. After the initial chapter on “The Mystery of the Church,” the next three chapters that follow, in order, are: “The People of God,” “The Hierarchical Structure of the Church,” The Laity,” and “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church.” Before any sort of vocational distinctions are made and explained in *Lumen Gentium*, the emphasis on the mystery of the Church is first placed within the context of the entire People of God. 63 “This basic unity and equality is prior to any differences in function, power and office which exist between them. The laity are not second-class citizens and the mission of the Church is not the preserve of those in holy orders.” 64

The rest of the document develops this concept, and then explains more fully the universal call to holiness in the fifth chapter. In this section, it states:

> Everyone, whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness… It is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity … They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy… The classes and duties of life are many, but holiness is one.” 65

However, holiness is more than simply a universal divine invitation. It is also an obligation—a gift that requires a loving response to the will of God within our state of life and daily circumstances. It is on this point that the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* and Francis de Sales intersect most clearly. As mentioned earlier, Francis emphasized throughout his writings not only that sanctity is for everyone, but that it is indistinct from daily life, and is experienced in the midst of it. Employing different terminology, both urge us to “Live Jesus!” Each of the faithful, *Lumen Gentium* states, “must complete what God has begun by their own actions with the help

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63 cf. Leviticus 26:12.
64 Ryan, “The Laity,” 237.
65 *Lumen Gentium*, 39, 40, 41.
of God’s grace,” with charity ruling over all as the bond of perfection.\footnote{66} As one commentator puts it, “If \textit{all is grace}, the grace that is in us fosters a virtuous life, by which the holiness given to us becomes truly ours. And this holiness configures us so deeply to Christ that we are saved and also become participants in the work of our salvation in Christ.”\footnote{67}

All the People of God, \textit{Lumen Gentium} points out, constitute a royal priesthood,\footnote{68} and are sharers in the priestly, prophetical, and kingly functions of Christ by virtue of their baptism.\footnote{69} What distinguishes the lay faithful, however, is their “secular nature.”\footnote{70} Here, the document could almost be read as a commentary, so to speak, on the teachings of Francis de Sales:

\begin{quote}

The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God, that by exercising their proper functions and led by the spirit of the Gospel, they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven… All their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—\textit{all these become} “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” [cf. \textit{1Peter} 2:5]… All Christ’s faithful, whatever be the conditions, duties and circumstances of their lives—indeed through all these, will daily increase in holiness, if they receive all things with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father and if they cooperate with the divine will.\footnote{71}

By engaging in secular activities, the lay faithful participate in God’s plan to “sum up all things in Christ.”\footnote{72} They exercise their common priesthood to “dedicate every sphere of human activity to God and consecrate the whole world to him.”\footnote{73} Congar has a nice way of putting this. Everything begins, he says, with God’s will, “which gives or restores the world to us as a duty and as task.” From this unbreakable link follows the chain of Christian spirituality: will of God

\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}

\item[66] Ibid, 42.
\item[67] de La Soujeole, O.P., “The Universal Call to Holiness,” 52.
\item[68] \textit{Lumen Gentium}, 9; cf. \textit{1Peter} 2:9-10.
\item[69] Ibid., 31.
\item[70] Ibid.
\item[71] Ibid., 31, 34, 41.
\item[72] cf. \textit{Ephesians} 1:10.
\item[73] Ryan, “The Laity,” 252. (See also \textit{Apostolicam Actuositatem}, particularly chapters 1 and 2.)
\end{footnotes}
vocation → service and its demands → engagement and responsibility → all beneath the sign of the Cross. And the will of God, from and to which all flows, is simply Love.\footnote{Congar, O.P., Lay People in the Church, 424.}

Using this model, the true nature of the universal call to holiness comes into sharper focus. As human beings—often inclined more toward \textit{doing} than \textit{being}—it is tempting to equate holiness with external apostolate or ministry, with one’s particular place within the context of ecclesial hierarchy. However, the intimate nature of the universal call to holiness involves the need for the individual’s \textit{interior transformation through human cooperation with divine grace}. This is something that corresponds with, but necessarily precedes, encompasses, and drives any notion of apostolate or ministry. As \textit{Lumen Gentium} makes clear, the particular arises from the common (which is not to mitigate the most particular of all calls, the priest as mediator in ministering to the faithful; that is a separate discussion). The point is that \textit{all} share the call to perfection of charity as People of God.

Within this Love, experienced at the foot of the Cross, dwells the mystery of how something so grand is possible. Once again, \textit{Lumen Gentium} and Francis de Sales—indeed the entire tradition of the Church—are in agreement. The People of God strive by God’s grace for holiness and serve as a light to the nations by remaining connected to the \textit{sources} of grace that the Church provides. Principally, these are prayer (which includes reading of Scripture and participation in public worship), the sacraments (especially the Eucharist), and the constant practice of virtue in every circumstance.\footnote{\textit{Lumen Gentium} 42; de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, 31.} “It is [the Christian’s] lifelong task to make his own the gifts which God gives him, to manifest them and give them realization in the human terms of

\footnote{Congar, O.P., Lay People in the Church, 424.}
\footnote{\textit{Lumen Gentium} 42; de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, 31.}
his own situation. However, there is no one who does not fall far short of this ideal by sin, and
the daily prayer of the Christian must be for the mercy of God: ‘Forgive us our trespasses.’”

**Giving flesh to the Word—in Francis’ time and ours**

In many ways, the work of St. Francis de Sales—thoroughly rooted in the Gospel—
prefigures the emphasis that Vatican II and the Church today place on the universal call to
holiness. Nearly 400 years prior to the Council, in his “instant best-seller” *Introduction to the
Devout Life* and his many letters of spiritual direction, Francis emphasized the truth that all
Christians are called to lives of holiness—and he demonstrated how in an intimate,
straightforward manner focused on “Living Jesus.” While he wrote within his own time and
circumstances, he has something just as important to say today about what it means to be holy.

The parallels between *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *Lumen Gentium* are many.
Both stress the baptismal character of faithfully living out the universal call to holiness, and that
we are all called to be saints through our response to God’s grace within the ordinary daily
circumstances of our lives. Both identify the principal means as arising from prayer, the
sacraments, and the practice of virtue. As one commentator points out, this unified vision is even
articulated in similar language by Francis and the Council fathers.  

It is no stretch of the imagination to see the spirit of Francis de Sales at work in *Lumen
Gentium*. The Council’s fathers, while not directly attributing Francis, nonetheless give a great

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76 McGoldrick, “The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness,” 269.
77 Corrigan, “The Universal Call to Holiness,” 6. As Corrigan points out, for example, Francis writes that
devotion, or holiness, “is the perfection of charity” and that “charity alone can establish us in perfection”
(*Introduction to the Devout Life*, 31, 142). Similarly, *Lumen Gentium* states: “Charity, as the bond of perfection and
the fullness of the law, rules over all the means of attaining holiness and gives life to these same means. It is charity
which guides us to our final end. It is the love of God and the love of one’s neighbor which points out the true
disciple of Christ” (*Lumen Gentium*, 42).
deal of credit to this Doctor of the Church for his influence on their deliberations and documents (particularly Chapter V of Lumen Gentium). Léon Joseph Cardinal Suenens, a chief architect at the Council, states that Francis’ vision at Vatican II helped craft the contemporary Church’s understanding of the universal call to holiness. He says: “If one wishes to disclose the imprint of Saint Francis de Sales on the contemporary church it would not be difficult to discover, if not his name, at least his perceptible influence in between the lines of many of the great texts of the Council.”

Similarly, in Sabaudiae Gemma, the apostolic letter on the 400th anniversary of the birth of Francis, Pope Paul VI says:

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 things be imitated, embraced, and followed.

It is significant that the Holy Father points to Francis’ influence on the Council, in part, “by the example of his life,” as well as through his specific teachings. As has been noted, what Francis had to say was essentially nothing new. How he said it is the door of enlightenment, and why is the key to unlocking it. Francis thoroughly lived the universal call to holiness himself, and his commitment to “Live Jesus” was shaped by the times in which he lived and the manner in which God was at work in his own life. As Pope Pius XI stated in his encyclical declaring Francis the patron saint of writers:

It appears that Francis de Sales was given to the Church by God for a very special mission. His task was to give lie to the prejudice which in his lifetime was deeply rooted and has not been destroyed even today, that the ideal of genuine sanctity held up for our imitation by the Church is impossible… All are called by God to a state of sanctity and all are obliged to try to attain it.


Pope Paul VI, Sabaudiae Gemma.

Pope Pius XI, Rerum Omnium Perturbationem, 4, 27.
Pope Pius XI wrote that in 1923, nearly 40 years before Vatican II. Long before that, in 1877, Pope Pius IX in his apostolic letter declaring Francis a Doctor of the Church, wrote that the Savoyard “showed all that heaven was accessible,” and that he “should be counted among the most distinguished teachers Christ our Lord has given to his spouse, the Church.” By such comments (and their timing), one can recognize that the Church’s understanding of the universal call to holiness has developed over time through our sacred tradition, of which the very flesh-and-blood life of Francis de Sales is an essential element.

There is an enriching mystery to be engaged between the lines of Francis’ *Introduction to the Devout Life* and behind its publication in 1609 that a mere analysis of the book’s mechanics, so to speak, would fail to explore. The book’s lasting value arises from the *manner* in which its message is presented—the “heart-to-heart” approach of a masterful spiritual director who, in his special and direct care for the individual soul, stresses the universal call to “Live Jesus!” Francis’ manner of presenting this message reveals much about his *own* heart and his own experiences in life, and this is what makes him so attractive and accessible. As Joseph F. Chorpenning, O.S.F.S., observes, *Introduction to the Devout Life* “was born of Francis’ own experience…The *Introduction*’s back-story is also a vivid reminder that spiritual growth and development tend to be a slow, gradual process, even for a saint, and that more often than not, require diligence, patience, perseverance, and humility—little virtues that Francis models in exemplary fashion.”

As we shall see, Francis’ *Introduction to the Devout Life* was borne through his very own “introduction to the devout life.” By responding to his own inner call to become holy and live

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81 Pope Pius IX, *Dives in misericordia Deus.*
Jesus, Francis gave flesh to the “living and active” Word, speaking heart to heart from the Heart, and helped provide the tissue to a concept for which Vatican II would later develop a skeletal framework. His hope, as well as that of the Council fathers, was that “living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body’s growth and builds itself up in love.”

**Love casts out fear: How Francis’ outlook developed**

A brilliant student, Francis studied philosophy, theology, and law. He was quite familiar with all the spiritual currents of his time, and he later became acquainted with many who subscribed to one or the other of the four spiritual schools of thought (outlined above) in 16th and 17th Century France. Encountering all this helped shape his outlook and beliefs, which later were conveyed through his writing and ministry.

At the age of 15, the young Francis left Annecy for Paris, where he studied the humanities and philosophy at the Jesuit college of Clérmont. Eight years later, he became a student of law and theology at the University of Padua. These years were instrumental for him not only intellectually but spiritually. As Chorpenning notes, “the story of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*] actually begins with Francis’ own efforts as a layperson to live the devout life

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83 cf. Hebrews 4:12.
84 Ephesians 4:15-16.
during his student days in Paris and Padua. As a spiritual teacher and director, Francis imparted to others lessons he first thoroughly learned himself.”

It was in Paris that Francis began his long association with the Jesuits and Ignatian spirituality, which had a lasting influence on him. His teachers were Jesuits, as were his spiritual directors. Throughout his life, he continued to be spiritually directed by Jesuit priests, and he made retreats employing the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. One lesson gained from this immersion in Ignatian spirituality was that “cultivation of the spiritual life in the midst of the world required strategy. The key was to order each day: daily attendance at Mass, meditative prayer, frequent reception of Holy Common [recall that this was the late 16th Century, before frequent Communion had become the norm], weekly confession, devotion to the Virgin Mary and the saints, and of course, the practice of the virtues, specifically obedience, humility, piety, fidelity to the duties of one’s state in life, civility, and chastity.” Many of these same elements would later be incorporated into *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

In Padua, Francis was introduced to Scupoli’s *Spiritual Combat*. The book became his lifelong companion for reading and meditation, and exerted tremendous influence on his subsequent teachings at a time when holiness (meant only for the few) was popularly associated with monastic enclosure, rigorous religious observances, and extreme bodily mortification. The opening pages of *Spiritual Combat* refute this notion in a manner that Francis would later develop in his own spiritual classic:

89 Chorpenning, O.S.F.S., “The 400th Anniversary of a Spiritual Classic,” 231.
91 de la Bedoyere, *SaintMaker*, 34.
There are many who have believed [spiritual perfection] to consist exclusively in outward mortification, in long watchings and fastings, and in other bodily sufferings and chastisements. Others think they have reached the climax of perfection when they say many prayers, attend many services and offices, and are regularly at church and at Communion… Although these practices are sometimes means of gaining spiritual perfection, and are sometimes its fruits, in no sense can it be said that true spiritual perfection consists in these… [By them] we are provided with those spiritual helps that are necessary to all the servants of God… [But for some] who base perfection entirely on external practices, such works may bring greater ruin than do open sins… They vainly fancy that they are roaming amid the delights of Paradise…They are self-willed and opinionated, blind to their own faults, sharp-sighted when it comes to the faults of others, and they severely condemn the sayings and doings of other men.92

Another near-contemporary spiritual author who gained the interest and appreciation of Francis was Louis of Granada, whose works he often highly recommended to others in his letters of spiritual direction.93 As he did with Scupoli, St. Ignatius, and others, Francis later drew on Louis of Granada’s insights in writing his *Introduction to the Devout Life* and his letters. Jordan Aumann, O.P., notes that after St. Ignatius, Louis of Granada was the “first spiritual writer to formulate a method of prayer for the laity,” one based on discursive meditation. The theme which runs through his writings is that “all Christians are called to perfection…Each Christian should seek the goal of perfection in accordance with his temperament, his state in life, and the gifts he has received from God.”94

During his time in Padua, Francis came under the spiritual direction of the Italian Jesuit theologian and papal legate Antonio Possevino. Inspired by Scupoli’s book and with Possevino’s guidance, Francis composed for himself a rule of life or a set of “spiritual exercises.” The aim was to assist his spiritual life “while in the midst of the dissipated world of student life in Padua,” but many of these same exercises were later gathered and developed in his *Introduction*...
to the Devout Life. Biographer Michael de la Bedoyere notes that some important themes course through this early rule which later became hallmarks of Francis de Sales’ spirituality:

- An emphasis on “forward examination” of conscience rather than retrospective since “he was more interested in arming himself against the dangers to come than in inviting scruples through dwelling too much on what is over and done with.”

- The meditative practice of “sacred sleep,” or spiritual rest of the mind during the working hours of the day to focus on the holy and avoid the sinful—an analogy that recalls the body’s need for sleep during the night.

- Spiritual optimism: “Better to think of the attraction of virtue than to dwell on the evil of sin.”

- A detailed resolution to practice virtue and strive for sanctity within the circumstances of daily life, particularly through his relationships with other people.

A number of Francis’ fellow students at Padua were so struck by the “practicality, wisdom, and excellence” of his spiritual exercises that they requested copies to use for their own spiritual journeys. In a sense, these guidelines resembled a “first draft” of Introduction to the Devout Life, which was published 20 years later. Now a young man, Francis—who returned to Savoy in 1592 and was ordained a priest a year later—had begun to assimilate what he had absorbed from earlier influences and adapt it for his own use. In addition, he was learning that others were interested in the wisdom he had to impart, no doubt because of his personal witness of “Living Jesus.”

One remaining episode from this period of his life must be mentioned—a crucial defining moment that colored his spiritual outlook, pastoral ministry, and writing for the rest of his life.

During his days as a student in Paris, he underwent a severe spiritual crisis over the issue of

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95 Chorpenning, O.S.F.S., “The 400th Anniversary of a Spiritual Classic,” 233; de la Bedoyere, SaintMaker, 35.
96 de la Bedoyere, SaintMaker, 35-37. (All bulleted items here refer to same).
predestination, God’s foreknowledge, and human free will. Somehow (whether due to exhaustion, some unknown indiscretion, latent adolescent angst, an anxious temperament, or pure spiritual temptation to despair which was allowed to test him—the reason is not clear), Francis became convinced that he was eternally damned, and he fell into a six-week tailspin that wreaked havoc on him to the point of severe physical illness. Whatever the precipitating factor may have been, the crisis was fueled by the theological debates of the day between Catholics and Protestants, and by the questions raised in his studies of the teachings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas on the topic. The Jansenists appealed to both Augustine and Aquinas. Francis’ Jesuit teachers disagreed, and they differed with the Dominican interpretation of Augustine and Aquinas. Additionally, no one, it seemed to him, offered a suitable response to the Calvinists. Francis found himself caught in the middle of it all.98

Finally, one day in January 1587, he entered the church of Etienne-des-Grès, knelt in the Lady Chapel and prayed before a statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance. He found himself offering up an act of abandonment: “Whatever may happen, O Lord…I will love you always…at least in this life will I love you if it is not given me to love you in eternal life.” He then noticed a prayer card on the railing printed with the words of the Memorare, which he then prayed. Suddenly, he inwardly heard the words: “I am not he who damns. My name is Jesus.” His anguish and despair vanished, never to torment him again, and he was overcome with a deep sense of peace.99

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This moment changed the course of his life, and by extension, those whom he would later counsel spiritually. Swept away from his mind were any doubts stemming from the theological debates of the day. God’s love and mercy, he knew, always reign supreme. He had learned to see through the eyes of compassion and hope, and this inspired optimism would become the cornerstone of all his works, as well as his manner of being. As one biographer writes, it is difficult “not to notice a mysterious correlation between this crisis and the apostolic destiny to which God was going to call Francis.” His teaching “would be efficacious only because it would not only be conceived by his mind but born of a tragic experience.”

Later, there would be other occasional spiritual anxieties and serious illnesses with which to contend, though none apparently as severe. On the path of holiness, Francis was very human. “Such weaknesses… make it clear that his habitual and characteristic spiritual serenity was not just a happy natural disposition, but the result of a strong willpower deliberately turned to God… He struggled like the rest of us.” His spiritual directees, the many readers of Introduction to the Devout Life over four centuries, and indeed all those to whom he ministered would be the ultimate beneficiaries of this process of grace building on nature. “It was not sentimentality or softness which was to make him the gentle and optimistic guide of souls, but the love that had cast out fear.”

Introduction to the Devout Life

These experiences and others in Francis’ lifetime underpinned what he had to say and how he said it in Introduction to the Devout Life, and especially in his letters of spiritual

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100 Dailey, O.S.F.S., “The ‘Real’ Story on St. Francis de Sales.”
101 Ravier, S.J., Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint, 33-34.
102 de la Bedoyere, SaintMaker, 89.
103 Ibid., 24.
direction. However, that is not to imply that his was a passive soul entirely molded by the forces and circumstances around him, and that he had nothing unique to offer—quite the contrary! Christianity in late 16th and early 17th Century Europe was slowly turning from what had been fiercely ascetic and penitential in character to a “gentler, more optimistic one emphasizing a compassionate impulse.” Society was becoming more literate, and as devotional works became more available, Christians began adopting a more interior view of faith, with more of an emphasis on the transformation of heart in striving to live a more virtuous life.104 Lay spirituality—due in no small part to the Jesuits—was in an embryonic stage, and most scholars concur that it was Francis de Sales who delivered it into full birth.

His Introduction to the Devout Life was essentially the first spiritual treatise written specifically for the laity.105 It spelled out an everyday doctrine of holiness for all in terms that most people could understand—as attested by its instant and wide popularity.106 “The doctrine taught by St. Francis de Sales was not new, but he did present spiritual teaching in an original manner and he deserves credit for removing Christian spirituality from the monastic framework in which it had been confined for many centuries.”107 He was able to extract, adapt, and rearticulate spiritual insights in the monastically oriented classics and “integrate them into contemporary concerns and idioms.”108

Francis—employing the term “devotion” in the same manner that the word “holiness” is used today—acknowledges in the opening of Introduction to the Devout Life:

106 By the end of the 19th Century, more than 400 editions had appeared in numerous languages. It was even widely read by Protestants (see Wright, above, 240).
108 Wright, Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life, 42.
I neither can nor will, nor indeed should I, write in this Introduction anything but what has already been published... The flowers I present to you, my reader, are the same; the bouquet I have made out of them differs from others because it has been fashioned in a different order and way. Almost all those who have hitherto written about devotion have been concerned with instructing persons wholly withdrawn from the world or have at least taught a kind of devotion that leads to such complete retirement. My purpose is to instruct those who live in town, within families, or at court, and by their state of life are obliged to live an ordinary life as to outward appearances. Frequently, on the pretext of some supposed impossibility, they will not even think of undertaking a devout life... [However], when he created things God commanded plants to bring forth their fruits, each one according to its kind, and in like manner he commands Christians, the living plants of his Church, to bring forth the fruits of devotion, each according to his position and vocation. Devotion must be exercised in different ways by the gentleman, the worker, the servant, the prince, the widow, the young girl, and the married woman. Not only is this true, but the practice of devotion must also be adapted to the strength, activities, and duties of each particular person.

The genius of the mature Francis—like the gentle but firm young priest who won over the Calvinists in the Chablais region—is that, like Jesus, he meets people precisely where they are, and he does so bearing the fruit of his own interior life focused on “Living Jesus.” Like any good spiritual director, he is a companion on humanity’s common journey toward holiness. He takes “the reader to his heart from the first, speaking to him as to a well-known friend and quite simply assuming that the love of God was the only thing that mattered.” His readers—in the 17th Century and today—discern that he speaks from the heart the truth that is within their own hearts, and assists them in cultivating the presence of God amid everyday life.

Holiness: Devotion from the heart

In one of his letters of spiritual direction from 1604, Francis advises the young, eager, and anxious Marie Bourgeois Brulart to be calm and avoid excess in her struggle to harmonize family life and her fervent commitment to the spiritual life. In this letter, he gently reminds Madame Brulart that devotion (holiness) is not distinct from the ordinary activities and encounters of the day. In simple terms, he describes the true meaning of holiness—the perfection of charity—which is expressed in and through daily actions:

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109 de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, 21-22; 31-32.
110 Stopp, “The Art of the Writer,” 76.
111 Wright, “Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life” (Christian Spirituality), 234.
You must not only be devout and love devotion, but you must render it lovable to everyone. Now you will make it lovable if you render it useful and pleasing. The sick will love your devotion if they receive care and comfort from it; your family will love it if they see you more attentive to their well-being, more gentle in handling affairs, more kind in correcting, and so on; your husband will love it if he sees that as your devotion increases, you become more warm and affectionate toward him; your relatives and friends will love it if they see you more free, supportive of others, and yielding to them in matters that are not contrary to God’s will. In short, we must, as far as possible, make our devotion attractive.\(^{112}\)

This letter introduces a theme that is central to *Introduction to the Devout Life*. In slightly varied ways, Francis stresses early and often in the book that devotion in its most authentic sense is essentially love in action. It is the only true aim of holiness, and his very precise definition squares with that provided by many Church fathers. “Genuine, living devotion,” he says, “presupposes love of God, and hence it is simply true love of God… [It] not only makes us do good, but also do this *carefully, frequently, and promptly*.\(^{113}\)

Here, Francis draws a distinction between devotion and “devotions,” while at the same time stressing that the two must be interconnected. Holiness means not only praying and engaging in spiritual exercises, but practicing the perfection of virtue *carefully, frequently, and promptly* in every circumstance that daily life provides. We must be *intentional* about manifesting our devotion to the love of God in every word, task, and encounter with others. We must do so this as *often* as human frailty strengthened by divine grace allows. And, we must do this *quickly and fervently*, as one who “not only walks but runs and leaps forward on the way of God’s commandments.”\(^{114}\)

Near the beginning of *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Francis stresses this in a fashion similar to Scupoli’s warning in his *Spiritual Combat* about false devotion—“devotions” that are disconnected from genuine devotion:

\(^{112}\) de Sales and de Chantal, (Wright and Power, O.S.F.S.), *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 104.

\(^{113}\) de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 28, emphasis added.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 29.
A man given to fasting thinks himself devout if he fasts, although his heart may be filled with hatred… Another man thinks himself devout because he daily recites a vast number of prayers, but after saying them he utters the most disagreeable, arrogant and harmful words at home and among the neighbors. Another gladly takes a coin out of his purse and gives it to the poor, but he cannot extract kindness from his heart and forgive his enemies.  

Francis also writes that genuine holiness does not usually entail anything spectacular—such as visions, sustained sensible consolations and spiritual sweetness, or heroic efforts at virtue. Rather, he says, holiness is achieved simply through the mundane and often annoying, tiresome, or inconvenient circumstances of our present situation and state in life:

Bear patiently the slight injuries, the little inconveniences, and the inconsequential losses that daily come to you. By means of such trifles as these, borne with love and affection, you will completely win God’s heart and make it all your own… Practice those little, humble virtues which grow like flowers at the foot of the cross: helping the poor, visiting the sick, and taking care of your family, with all the tasks that go with such things… Great opportunities to serve God rarely present themselves but little ones are frequent. Whoever will be faithful over a few things will be placed over many, says the Savior.

Similarly, in a memo on Christian perfection, Francis states that reversals in life provide a pathway to spiritual growth: “The death of relatives, various losses, illnesses, dryness or distractions in prayer—these give us opportunities to grow in perfection. But we must go further and see this not only in great afflictions but even in little reversals and minor inconveniences.” Interestingly, in two other letters, Francis writes separately to two pregnant women, one who is distressed that her condition is making her usual meditation and other devotions difficult, and one who is fasting. The first he tells not to overtax herself, to make her prayer short and fervent and to consider her weariness as an offering to God. The second he simply tells to stop it!

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115 Ibid., 28.
117 Francis occasionally wrote short memos on the fundamentals of the spiritual life to be generally distributed to his directees and correspondents.
118 de Sales and de Chantal, (Wright and Power, O.S.F.S.), Letters of Spiritual Direction, 105.
119 Ibid., 115; de Sales, Thy Will be Done, 93.
Genuine devotion, Francis is saying, encompasses all of life. It is not simply a matter of performing spiritual exercises, as worthy as they may be in themselves. The devout life is precisely that—a life—and because this is a supernatural life, we need to be ‘introduced’ to it.”

The ladder of holiness

Francis de Sales did not intend to write *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Like so many other elements of his life, it came into being through the circumstances in which he found himself. As previously mentioned, the ministry of spiritual direction was central to Francis’ pastoral outlook. While never neglecting the necessary and often tiresome duties associated with his episcopacy, he saw a bishop’s primary duty as leading individual souls to perfection. In this light, he eagerly took particular care in directing the souls of several people who had turned to him for assistance (a time- and energy-consuming task, he acknowledges, with which many found fault). Since he lived in an age before planes, trains, automobiles, telephones, and email, his primary method of spiritual direction outside of face-to-face dialogue was in writing letters. As he had in Padua when he shared his spiritual exercises with fellow students, through his letters Francis recognized and responded to the average layperson’s need for practical guidance on striving for holiness amid their everyday lives. Ultimately, it was his ministry of writing letters of spiritual direction that led to the publication of *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Francis had been meeting with and spiritually directing Louise de Charmoisy, the wife of a cousin, in Annecy. However, in 1608 she had to leave Annecy to attend to some family legal

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matters in Chambéry. Before she departed, Francis gave her some memos he had composed outlining some spiritual exercises and other guidance. In Chambéry, Madame de Charmoisy showed these to her spiritual director, the Jesuit Jean Fourier, who also happened to be Francis’ spiritual director. Fourier was quite impressed, and immediately wrote to Francis, urging him to put the material into book form and have it published for popular use. Francis acquiesced, and the first edition was published in 1609, immediately selling out. That same year, Francis went to work on a second edition, adding some material (he asked his good friend Jane Frances de Chantal to return all the letters he had sent her), reorganizing the text, and expanding on some of his original points. Since the second (as well as the third and fourth) edition contained printing errors, a final, definitive version—the classic readers are familiar with today—was published in 1619. The success of Introduction to the Devout Life was instant and enormous. Even during Francis’ lifetime, it was translated into several languages. Today, nearly 400 years later, it is “one of the most enduring of religious classics in the Christian tradition.”

It should be noted that not everyone liked the book or what Francis had to say. “If the modern generation is apt to find some of the teachings too rigorous, some of de Sales’ contemporaries thought it altogether too lax. One preacher tore the book to pieces in the pulpit in protest against the writer’s tolerance of dancing… and modest, innocent mirth.”

Such critiques notwithstanding, there is no disputing that Introduction to the Devout Life had met a need. And much of the book’s success resulted not from a “spiritual program” that Francis had offered, but from the way he spoke from his heart to the reader. “Francis de Sales’

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123 Wright, Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life, 33.
124 de la Bedoyere, SaintMaker, 207.
writing, like his public speaking, affected people. And his writing reflected his personality, which was especially accessible… Something about his message and the way he delivered it drew all these varied individuals… His heart, moved by the love of God he experienced so deeply, was in those memos and in that book.”

Part of the appeal of *Introduction to the Devout Life* is Francis’ use of metaphors to convey spiritual truths, employing images that his readers would be familiar with in 17th Century France. In particular, he was very fond of referring to Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, and many of his teachings are illustrated with references to plants, flowers, and bees—*lots* of bees. However, his own experience of nature should not be discounted. As a priest and a bishop, he traveled a great deal through the hills, mountains, and valleys of the Savoy region—much of it on foot. Surely, he studied closely the book of nature set before him along the way, mentally cataloging object lessons that would later prove helpful for his spiritual directees and readers.

Francis also uses scriptural imagery in *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and it is the image of Jacob’s Ladder that he uses to describe for Philothea the means that are available to all those striving for holiness. On the surface, he introduces nothing new: prayer, the sacraments, and the practice of virtue. And he uses the image of a ladder, something everyone is familiar with. However, it is the manner in which he pulls together these old standards and presents them which draw the reader in to consider the old in a new way:

Consider Jacob’s ladder, for it is a true picture of the devout life. The two sides between which we climb upward and to which the rungs are fastened represent prayer, which calls down God’s love, and the sacraments, which confer it. The rungs are the various degrees of charity by which we advance from virtue to virtue, either descending by deeds of help and support for our neighbor or by contemplation ascending to a loving union with God.

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125 Wright, Francis de Sales: *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 34.
In guiding his readers up this ladder, Francis divides *Introduction to the Devout Life* into five parts. Contemporary commentator Wendy M. Wright employs some wonderful imagery of her own in categorizing these five parts, briefly summarized as follows:  

**Preparing the soul:** In the first part, Francis offers a series of meditations for the purgation of sin. For gardens to flourish, Francis notes, vines must be pruned and weeds pulled. Even so, Francis urges patience since purgation and healing of either body or soul is only accomplished a little at a time: “We must not be disturbed at our imperfections, since for us perfection consists in fighting against them… We are always victorious provided that we are willing to fight.” Proposed are meditations on the subjects of creation, the true end of humanity, God’s goodness, sin, death, judgment, hell, and heaven, along with an act of election: choosing the devout life. The influence of Ignatian spirituality on Francis is prevalent in this section of the book. However, before he begins his treatment of purgation, he tells Philothea that the “most important of all words of advice” is to place herself under the care of a good spiritual director to accompany her along the path of devotion. “By such means the good will be examined and approved and what is bad will be corrected and repaired. You will be consoled and strengthened in your afflictions and moderated and regulated in your consolations.”

**Planting the seeds:** In the second part, Francis encourages practices that lead to deepening love of God and neighbor: daily mental prayer, morning and evening prayers, examination of conscience, weekly confession, weekly Mass and frequent Communion (which was not the norm at the time), devotion to Scripture, spiritual reading, and the practice of interior recollection. Attention of the mind—not rote recitation—is urged: “Do not hurry along and say many things but try to speak from your heart. A single Our Father said with feeling has greater value than many said quickly and hurriedly.” Francis also advises short spontaneous prayers silently offered to God during the course of the day, as well as gathering a “devotional bouquet” during meditation that one can “smell and keep for the rest of the day.” Much of this section bears resemblance to Scupoli’s *Spiritual Combat*.

**Cultivating the garden:** The third part of *Introduction to the Devout Life* focuses on the practice of virtue, and is really the heart of the book. Charity, of course, is presented as the greatest of virtues, but practice of the “little virtues” is encouraged in particular: humility, patience, and above all, the French term *douceur*, which is usually translated

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128 Wright’s splendid characterization of the five parts of Francis’ book, summarized here and interspersed with additional comments of my own and further references, can be found in her “Francis de Sales: *Introduction to the Devout Life*,” in *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, 237-240.  
130 Ibid., 35. (Francis insists throughout his book and elsewhere on the need for a good spiritual director.)  
133 Ibid., 78.
into English as “gentleness.” However, Wright maintains that “gentleness” doesn’t convey the full meaning of douceur, to which she also applies “gracefulness” and “graciousness.”  

Throughout it all, the interior and the relational aspects of virtue are emphasized. It is worthwhile noting here that Francis didn’t just write about the virtues; he struggled to practice them himself. Though he has been characterized through the centuries as a saint displaying great douceur, he was by his own admission naturally ill-tempered!  

Douceur didn’t come easily for him; he had to work at it. Contained in this section as well are insightful discussions on the role and value of friendship and marriage (quite progressive for his day).

**Cultivating the garden:** In the fourth part of the book, Francis offers advice on persevering in the devout life with diligence. Specifically, he gives instructions on how to resist specific temptations, deal with anxiety and sorrow, and maintain calmness of spirit.

**The fruitful life:** In the last section of *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Francis writes a series of reflections encouraging Philothea to periodically renew and confirm her choice of the devout life. “There is no clock, no matter how good it may be,” he says, “that doesn’t need resetting and rewinding twice a day... In addition, at least once a year it must be taken apart to remove the dirt clogging it, straighten out bent parts, and repair those worn out.”

In the final pages of the book, Francis extends words of comfort and encouragement, restating with simple elegance the theme that underlies the whole work: “Perform these exercises confidently, as I have marked them out for you, and God will give you the sufficient leisure and strength to perform all your other duties... We always do enough when God works with us.”

We don’t climb the ladder of holiness alone.

**Conclusion: Living Jesus today**

Matthew’s Gospel closes with these stirring words from Jesus: “Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end

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134 Wright, *Francis de Sales: Introduction to the Devout Life*, 78.
137 Ibid., 277.
of the age.” This is both a challenging directive and a consoling message. As Christians, our fundamental mission—expressed in myriad ways—is to bring Christ to the world. To do this, however, we must first be Christs, and to be what we profess, we need to continually open our hearts to the presence of Christ, who is with us always. After the Resurrection, Jesus appears as a stranger to two followers on the road to Emmaus. Walking with them, he interprets the Scriptures, and later accepts their invitation to “stay with us” in Emmaus. Finally, they recognize Jesus as he blesses and breaks bread, and their response is to go out and recount “what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them.” These two were among the first Christian disciples to discover the meaning of “Living Jesus,” and the key to this encounter was that Jesus met them on their journey bearing the Word and the Bread of Life. Nourished by Jesus and cooperating with divine grace on the path to holiness, they in turn were equipped to make Christ present in the world around them and share the Good News. And it was a journey—a gradual process of living faith in which everything is not instantly recognized or accomplished (in fact, when Jesus met them, they were walking the wrong way—away from Jerusalem).

Today, as in those first days of the Resurrection, Jesus accompanies each of his followers on the (often winding) road of holiness, bearing his presence in Word and Sacrament, and calling us to the heavenly Jerusalem through earthly lives sustained by prayer, the sacraments, and the practice of virtue. Through baptismal incorporation into the Body of Christ, all Christians are called to follow this path, though each according to his or her own particular state in life. The Church has always pointed the way, but at times the directions have needed to be reinforced. For this reason, saints like Francis de Sales serve as guideposts for us all, but not without walking the same path themselves. In his Introduction to the Devout Life, his letters of spiritual direction, and

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principally through his own manner of living, Francis demonstrated that—through cooperation with God’s grace—we are all meant to become holy, to be saints. This universal call to holiness, or devotion as he called it, involves taking to heart the gift God offers in himself, and then allowing Jesus to dwell within our humanity each day as we strive toward the perfection of charity.

Nearly 400 years after Francis’ death, the Second Vatican Council re-introduced, so to speak, Christians to the devout life, reiterating and expanding on the theme of the universal call to holiness in Lumen Gentium. In this sense, Francis de Sales has much to offer any Christian today striving to respond to the universal call to holiness proclaimed by Vatican II; as Blessed Pope John Paul II stated in 2002, Francis “remains a source of light for our contemporaries as he was in his time.”

Whether in the time of Moses or Jesus or St. Paul, in 1609 or 1964 or 2012, it seems the same message—progressively developed and driven by the Holy Spirit—arises from its very urgent need to be heard by the People of God. Perhaps today, more than ever, the connection between faith and daily life, the spiritual and the secular, is obscured in an increasingly “fragmented and frenetic society.” The lay faithful—indeed all of us—need to rediscover the centrality of prayer, the sacraments (particularly the Eucharist), and the practice of virtue in our lives, and what it means to be holy—to seek and find the extraordinary through the ordinary, to live as People of God safely borne along the stormy seas of this world.

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140 Pope John Paul II, Letter to Bishop Yves Boivineau of Annecy, France, on the fourth centenary of the episcopal ordination of Francis de Sales.
In this regard, Francis’ *Introduction to the Devout Life* serves as an inspirational roadmap for the sojourner on the way of perfection—a practical companion volume, so to speak, to *Lumen Gentium*’s theological discourse on the universal call to holiness. Such is the recommendation of a number of contemporary commentators, spiritual writers, and theologians. Among them is Pope Benedict XVI, who had this to say in a 2011 catechesis as part of his weekly general audience series on the doctors of the Church: “St. Francis de Sales is an exemplary witness of Christian humanism; with his familiar style, with words which at times have a poetic touch, he reminds us that human beings have planted in their innermost depths the longing for God, and that in him alone can they find true joy and the most complete fulfillment.”142 Similarly, Jordan Aumann, O.P., remarks: “With so much emphasis today on the universal vocation to holiness and on the spirituality and apostolate of the laity, the teaching of St. Francis de Sales deserves the widest possible distribution…Any Christian who is seriously intent on striving for greater perfection will find an excellent guidebook in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.”143

During Francis’ time, holiness was considered impossible for most. In our day, the prevailing cultural attitude threatens something more pernicious—that holiness is unnecessary, or at least should be strictly an individual, private matter. Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S., remarks that this mindset is simply a modern variation of the medieval mentality that relegated holiness to monks, nuns, and clerics. Today, he says, this has morphed into the view that “religion is a ‘church’ thing, devoid of any particular relevance in the everyday world…It is also evident in the viewpoint that compartmentalizes faith as just one of the multiple aspects of life, along with (and

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sometimes in competition with) family, career, home, leisure and all those other realities that comprise our own ‘to do’ lists.”

Such a mindset ignores the fact that Christianity is incarnational, and for a reason: “to penetrate and perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel.” A sacramental approach to all of life is necessary, and it begins with the grace that God provides through Christ to transform outwardly what has been sanctified inwardly. Through this gift, we are each called to be holy as God is holy. Christian lives cannot operate on two parallel tracks: the spiritual and the secular. A house divided against itself cannot stand, and for this reason Jesus tells us, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” Our lives as Christians, therefore, must be one, united as branches to the life of Christ, the true vine. And lest there be any confusion, this struggle is not waged in the political arena or on the battlefield but first and foremost in the heart—to love as God loves, to “Live Jesus,” so that he may be all in all. Becoming a saint in any time in history means allowing Jesus’ heart to beat within us at all times, as Francis de Sales declared along his own path to holiness:

Engrave and inscribe on your heart this holy and sacred motto, “Live Jesus!” I am certain that your life, which comes from the heart just as the almond tree comes from its seed, will thereafter produce all its actions—which are its fruits—inscribed and engraved with this sacred word of salvation. As our beloved Jesus lives in your heart, so too he will live in all your conduct… With St. Paul you can say, “It is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me [Galatians 2:20].

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145 Apostolicam Actuositatem, 5.
149 de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, 172.
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