



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 2 March 2011*

[\[Video\]](#)

Saint Francis de Sales

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“God is God of the human heart” (*The Treatise on the Love of God*, I, XV). These apparently simple words give us an impression of the spirituality of a great teacher of whom I would like to speak to you today: St Francis de Sales, a Bishop and Doctor of the Church.

Born in 1567, in a French border region, he was the son of the Lord of Boisy, an ancient and noble family of Savoy. His life straddled two centuries, the 16th and 17th, and he summed up in himself the best of the teachings and cultural achievements of the century drawing to a close, reconciling the heritage of humanism striving for the Absolute that is proper to mystical currents.

He received a very careful education; he undertook higher studies in Paris, where he dedicated himself to theology, and at the University of Padua, where he studied jurisprudence, complying with his father’s wishes and graduating brilliantly with degrees in *utroque iure*, in canon law and in civil law.

In his harmonious youth, reflection on the thought of St Augustine and of St Thomas Aquinas led to a deep crisis. This prompted him to question his own eternal salvation and the predestination of God concerning himself; he suffered as a true spiritual drama the principal theological issues of his

time. He prayed intensely but was so fiercely tormented by doubt that for a few weeks he could barely eat or sleep.

At the climax of his trial, he went to the Dominicans' church in Paris, opened his heart and prayed in these words: "Whatever happens, Lord, you who hold all things in your hand and whose ways are justice and truth; whatever you have ordained for me... you who are ever a just judge and a merciful Father, I will love you Lord.... I will love you here, O my God, and I will always hope in your mercy and will always repeat your praise.... O Lord Jesus you will always be my hope and my salvation in the land of the living" (I *Proc. Canon.*, Vol. I, art. 4).

The 20-year-old Francis found peace in the radical and liberating love of God: loving him without asking anything in return and trusting in divine love; no longer asking what will God do with me: I simply love him, independently of all that he gives me or does not give me. Thus I find peace and the question of predestination — which was being discussed at that time — was resolved, because he no longer sought what he might receive from God; he simply loved God and abandoned himself to his goodness. And this was to be the secret of his life which would shine out in his main work: the *The Treatise on the Love of God*.

Overcoming his father's resistance, Francis followed the Lord's call and was ordained a priest on 18 December 1593. In 1602, he became Bishop of Geneva, in a period in which the city was the stronghold of Calvinism so that his episcopal see was transferred, "in exile" to Annecy.

As the Pastor of a poor and tormented diocese in a mountainous area whose harshness was as well known as its beauty, he wrote: "I found [God] sweet and gentle among our loftiest rugged mountains, where many simple souls love him and worship him in all truth and sincerity; and mountain goats and chamois leap here and there between the fearful frozen peaks to proclaim his praise" (*Letter to Mother de Chantal*, October 1606, in *Oeuvres*, éd. Mackey, t. XIII, p. 223).

Nevertheless the influence of his life and his teaching on Europe in that period and in the following centuries is immense. He was an apostle, preacher, writer, man of action and of prayer dedicated to implanting the ideals of the Council of Trent; he was involved in controversial issues dialogue with the Protestants, experiencing increasingly, over and above the necessary theological confrontation, the effectiveness of personal relationship and of charity; he was charged with diplomatic missions in Europe and with social duties of mediation and reconciliation.

Yet above all St Francis de Sales was a director: from his encounter with a young woman, Madame de Charmoisy, he was to draw the inspiration to write one of the most widely read books of the modern age, *The Introduction to a Devout Life*.

A new religious family was to come into being from his profound spiritual communion with an exceptional figure, St Jane Frances de Chantal: The Foundation of the Visitation, as the Saint

wished, was characterized by total consecration to God lived in simplicity and humility, in doing ordinary things extraordinarily well: "I want my Daughters", he wrote, not to have any other ideal than that of glorifying [Our Lord] with their humility" (*Letter to Bishop de Marquemonde*, June 1615). He died in 1622, at the age of 55, after a life marked by the hardness of the times and by his apostolic effort.

The life of St Francis de Sales was a relatively short life but was lived with great intensity. The figure of this Saint radiates an impression of rare fullness, demonstrated in the serenity of his intellectual research, but also in the riches of his affection and the "sweetness" of his teachings, which had an important influence on the Christian conscience.

He embodied the different meanings of the word "humanity" which this term can assume today, as it could in the past: culture and courtesy, freedom and tenderness, nobility and solidarity. His appearance reflected something of the majesty of the landscape in which he lived and preserved its simplicity and naturalness. Moreover the words of the past and the images he used resonate unexpectedly in the ears of men and women today, as a native and familiar language.

To Philotea, the ideal person to whom he dedicated his *Introduction to a Devout Life* (1607), Francis de Sales addressed an invitation that might well have seemed revolutionary at the time. It is the invitation to belong completely to God, while living to the full her presence in the world and the tasks proper to her state. "My intention is to teach those who are living in towns, in the conjugal state, at court" (*Preface to The Introduction to a Devout Life*). The Document with which Pope Leo xiii, more than two centuries later, was to proclaim him a Doctor of the Church, would insist on this expansion of the call to perfection, to holiness.

It says: "[true piety] shone its light everywhere and gained entrance to the thrones of kings, the tents of generals, the courts of judges, custom houses, workshops, and even the huts of herdsmen" (*cf. Brief, Dives in Misericordia*, 16 November 1877).

Thus came into being the appeal to lay people and the care for the consecration of temporal things and for the sanctification of daily life on which the Second Vatican Council and the spirituality of our time were to insist.

The ideal of a reconciled humanity was expressed in the harmony between prayer and action in the world, between the search for perfection and the secular condition, with the help of God's grace that permeates the human being and, without destroying him, purifies him, raising him to divine heights. To Theotimus, the spiritually mature Christian adult to whom a few years later he addressed his *Treatise on the Love of God*, St Francis de Sales offered a more complex lesson.

At the beginning it presents a precise vision of the human being, an anthropology: human "reason", indeed "our soul in so far as it is reasonable", is seen there as harmonious architecture,

a temple, divided into various courts around a centre, which, together with the great mystics he calls the “extremity and summit of our soul, this highest point of our spirit”.

This is the point where reason, having ascended all its steps, “closes its eyes” and knowledge becomes one with love (*cf.* Book I, chapter XII). The fact that love in its theological and divine dimension, may be the *raison d’être* of all things, on an ascending ladder that does not seem to experience breaks or abysses, St Francis de Sales summed up in a famous sentence: “man is the perfection of the universe; the spirit is the perfection of man; love, that of the spirit; and charity, that of love” (*ibid.*, Book X, chap. 1).

In an intensely flourishing season of mysticism *The Treatise on the Love of God* was a true and proper *summa* and at the same time a fascinating literary work. St Francis’ description of the journey towards God starts from recognition of the “natural inclination” (*ibid.*, Book 1, chapter XVI), planted in man’s heart — although he is a sinner — to love God above all things.

According to the model of Sacred Scripture, St Francis de Sales speaks of the union between God and man, developing a whole series of images and interpersonal relationships. His God is Father and Lord, husband and friend, who has the characteristics of mother and of wet-nurse and is the sun of which even the night is a mysterious revelation. Such a God draws man to himself with bonds of love, namely, true freedom for: “love has neither convicts nor slaves, but brings all things under its obedience with a force so delightful, that as nothing is so strong as love nothing also is so sweet as its strength” (*ibid.*, Book 1, chapter VI).

In our Saint’s *Treatise* we find a profound meditation on the human will and the description of its flowing, passing and dying in order to live (*cf. ibid.* Book IX, chapter XIII) in complete surrender not only to God’s will but also to what pleases him, to his “bon plaisir”, his good pleasure (*cf. ibid.*, Book IX, chapter I).

As well as by raptures of contemplative ecstasy, union with God is crowned by that reappearance of charitable action that is attentive to all the needs of others and which he calls “the ecstasy of action and life” (*ibid.*, Book VII, chapter VI).

In reading his book on the love of God and especially his many letters of spiritual direction and friendship one clearly perceives that St Francis was well acquainted with the human heart. He wrote to St Jane de Chantal: “... this is the rule of our obedience, which I write for you in capital letters: do all through love, nothing through constraint; love obedience more than you fear disobedience. I leave you the spirit of freedom, not that which excludes obedience, which is the freedom of the world, but that liberty that excludes violence, anxiety and scruples” (*Letter* of 14 October 1604).

It is not for nothing that we rediscover traces precisely of this teacher at the origin of many

contemporary paths of pedagogy and spirituality; without him neither St John Bosco nor the heroic “Little Way” of St Thérèse of Lisieux would have come into being.

Dear brothers and sisters, in an age such as ours that seeks freedom, even with violence and unrest, the timeliness of this great teacher of spirituality and peace who gave his followers the “spirit of freedom”, the true spirit.

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 fulfilment.

To special groups:

I am happy to greet the pilgrims from St Mary’s University College, Twickenham; I vividly recall their warm welcome during my recent Apostolic Visit to England. I also greet the group from St Norbert’s Catholic School in Denmark. To the choirs I express my gratitude for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience, especially those from Ireland, Finland, Singapore and the United States, I cordially invoke God’s abundant blessings.

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear young people, prepare yourselves to face the important stages of life with spiritual commitment, building all your projects on the sound foundations of fidelity to God. Dear *sick people*, may you be aware that you make a mysterious contribution to building God’s Kingdom, by offering your suffering to the heavenly Father, united with those of Christ. And you, dear *newlyweds*, may you seek every day to build your family by listening to God, in faithful reciprocal love and in the acceptance of those in the greatest need.

© Copyright 2011 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana