

St. Francis de Sales: *Patron of Journalists*



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THE SALESIAN CENTER
FOR FAITH AND CULTURE

January 26, 2003 marked the 80th anniversary of St. Francis de Sales' being named the Patron Saint of Journalists and Writers. That anniversary became the theme for the 2003 issues of Das Licht, published in Austria. In the six essays that follow, the editor-in-chief strives to explain in detail the reasons that led to his selection as patron.



THE SUCCESSFUL PRESS ACTION

[January-February 2003]

On January 25, 1595 Francis de Sales wrote a letter to the councilmen of Thonon, the capital of the Chablais region (southern Switzerland). A few months previously, on October 2, 1594 to be precise, the highest level of political power in the city had made the decision that every citizen who listened to the preaching of the cathedral provost of Geneva would be sternly punished. This method of intimidation achieved its goal, for only a handful of daring souls was brave enough to put aside this prohibition and, despite the threat of punishment, still attend the sermons of Francis de Sales.

A dangerous mission

Having only been ordained a priest on the 18th of December, Francis de Sales had declared quite openly in the summer of 1594 his preparedness to go into any part of the diocese of Geneva-Annecy, which was controlled at the time by the Calvinists. His mission was to win back to the Catholic faith the people living there. Not only was it a dangerous mission, during which on at least four occasions he would barely escape an attempt on his life, but it was also the beginning of an extremely frustrating and unsuccessful endeavor. The decision of the councilmen was only the peak of a month-long series of setbacks for the young provost.

But Francis de Sales did not consider giving up. After his father had learned of an attempt on his life, he wanted to bring Francis back to Annecy immediately. The young Francis refused. Completely alone, he bore the vicissitudes of a bitter winter in the French Alps. Daily he left his shelter in the castle of Allinges to talk with the people of Thonon and to convince them of the truth of the Catholic faith.

Yet all his efforts met with no success, since the majority of the people hesitated to listen to him speak, let alone listen to him preach. So the idea came to him to use the newly invented printing press and the popular medium of pamphlets to his own purposes. If people will not come to my sermons, thought Francis, then I have to bring my sermons to the people. The pamphlets helped him do that.

85 pamphlets

Francis de Sales declared his intentions in his letter of January 25, 1595, which he addressed to the councilmen: "Gentlemen, I have been preaching the word of God for some time now in your city. Your people can hear me only seldom and then only partially and in secret. For my part, in order not to overlook anything, I have seen to it that some of the more important fundamentals have been written down, fundamentals that I had chosen as the main theme of my sermons and talks in defense of the faith of the Church."

Within a year there appeared a series of some 85 pamphlets, which were posted by the front doors of homes and distributed in public areas. In these pamphlets, Francis de Sales explains the more important truths of the teachings of the Catholic Church and exposes the errors of the heretics. He does this in such a brilliant way that the interest of the populace in the explanations of the young preacher grew tremendously. In just a few weeks, more and

more people became less intimidated by the order of the councilmen, and they began to attend the sermons of Francis de Sales.

Success

After his death, the pamphlets were compiled and published under the title “Controversies.” This title does not originate with Francis, himself, and is somewhat misleading. First of all, it was not his intention to enter into controversy with the heretics. He wanted only to present and defend the truth of the faith in as convincingly powerful a way as possible, and that is what he did in a most successful way.

This first serial press action of the Catholic Church was the impetus for a letter which the Duke of Savoy wrote to the papal nuncio on October 20, 1598. In it he noted that in all of the Chablais there no longer existed any village or hamlet that was not Catholic. Pamphleteering was one of the reasons why Pope Pius XI later named Francis de Sales the Patron of Writers and Journalists for the entire Church.

THE AUTHOR OF A BESTSELLER

[March-April 2003]

With the exception of his theological masterpiece, the *Treatise on the Love of God*, which appeared in 1616, Francis de Sales never planned to write another book, let alone a bestseller. His life’s goal was to fulfill the will of God in all things, whatever divine providence might have prepared for him.



Understandably, the composition of his pamphlets showed that Francis de Sales had a talent for writing. Moreover, he did grasp that the written and printed word could be a great help in spreading and deepening the faith. He did not hesitate at all when people requested that he compile his writings and publish them. In the same way he complied with the wish of the only daughter of Prince Philipp Emmanuel of Lothringen to re-work his eulogy given at the prince’s burial and to publish it as a memorial to the deceased Count of Mercour.

Madame de Charmoisy

Soon after, Francis de Sales realized that, by adopting a written format, he could be of great help to the many people who asked him for advice on questions of faith and living, especially when, as in the case of Madame de Charmoisy, people lived at a distance from him. This lady, then, is the immediate impetus for why he came at all to the publication of his “Philothea” – the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. She showed the letters which she received from him to a Jesuit priest, Father Pourier, who was so pleased with the contents of those letters that he expressed the wish to Francis that he have them printed in order that they might become the cause of good not just for an individual but also for all who wished to become holy.

Francis de Sales saw the will of God in all this. He re-worked his letters so that they would produce a precise expression of his thoughts and would appear in a form better suited for general usage. He maintained the literary character of the letters and introduced the

common name “Philothea” (lover of God) as an introductory greeting. In this way, he created the mood that every reader would feel as though he/she were being personally addressed. One immediately gets the impression that this is not just some theological tome, but something very personal. 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, that here is someone who takes seriously the situation in which we live.

A Rapid Bestseller

The *Introduction to a Devout Life* appeared at the turn of the century (1608-1609) for the first time in Lyons and instantly became a bestseller. Within the briefest period, the book had to be re-printed a number of times; by the time of the saint’s death (in 1622), there were forty editions in French. By the middle of the seventeenth century, there were editions in seventeen different languages. Today, in the library at Annecy, 121 different editions of the book are archived.

As with every other good book, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* has its critics. There were priests and bishops who branded the book as the devil’s work and literally tore it to pieces. What was so radical and new that caused this criticism? New and never heard before was the message that every Christian, regardless of his/her vocation and state in life, was called to holiness and could achieve this sanctity. Piety must fit the circumstances of each person or state; otherwise, prayer and religious practices would be there for the individual, rather than the opposite.

Lay Spirituality

Today, such a message has lost its explosive character. Since the Second Vatican Council, the highest levels of the Church have approved the universal vocation of lay people to a life of holiness. However, in the 17th century, when the laity were not taken as seriously, such a theme sounded in the ears of many princes of the Church as an attack on Church authority.

Now, though, Francis de Sales can be designated not only as a precursor of Vatican II, but also as the founder of the lay spirituality movement. And he became the author of a bestseller, which even today is among the top ten works in Christian world literature. This, among other things, led to his being named Patron of Writers and Journalists in 1923.



20,000 LETTERS IN POLISHED FRENCH

[May-June 2003]

Saint Francis de Sales wrote more than 20,000 letters during his lifetime. Perhaps in an age of computers and e-mail, this number may not seem as impressive as it was in the seventeenth century. But four hundred years ago there were no large databases, copy machines, or mass mailings. In those times each letter had to be written by hand. A feather quill, ink and paper were the only things available to a writer in those times ... and, yes, a candle to light his desk at night!

High Quality

Francis de Sales wrote on the average two letters per day, sometimes as many as ten. Some Salesian scholars suggest that perhaps as many as forty or fifty left his quarters in Annecy near the episcopal church. Whether these numbers are totally correct cannot be established today with exactitude. The quality of the 2,100 letters from Francis de Sales that are still extant certainly lends credence to these figures.

These are not purposeless letters in post card style, but small gems in polished French in which the bishop of Geneva dealt with the widest variety of themes and requests. They contain his spiritual direction, which touched upon the most personal questions of people who asked for his advice and consoling words. They include episcopal decrees to pastors and abbots, canonical and liturgical instructions for reforms, short theological tracts on questions about the true teachings of the faith or preparation for the office of bishop, and detailed accounts on the political and ecclesiastical situation of his diocese and of his country. These latter were written to the Duke of Savoy, to the kings of France, to the papal nuncio, to episcopal friends, and to the Holy Father in Rome.

Not only does his language fascinate, but also Francis de Sales could almost effortlessly place himself in the shoes of those he addressed. His style varied according to who his reader was. The very same topic was handled in totally different words and examples with a cloistered nun than with the president of the parliament of Bourges or the scholarly Jesuit, Possevino. But one thing is for certain – his letters always exhibit a high degree of respect, which Francis de Sales wanted to express to each individual. The inquiry each one made, regardless of what it might be, is important to that person and therefore to him. Thus, he tried to take the matter at hand as seriously as if it were the most important thing in the world.

Reader-Oriented

For journalists, these letters represent teaching aids from a writer who always had the reader in mind. It made no difference to him whether he was writing on a topic for a university professor, a scientist, or a humble woman from the mountain area of Savoy. They all needed to be addressed in a style and language that is understandable to them, and Francis de Sales understood in a masterful way how to adapt himself to his reader.

Consider how little time is available to a bishop ordinarily to deal with the numerous tasks that his office demands, and the time Francis de Sales took to write these letters takes on an even greater significance. He was determined that regardless of the volume of his duties he would not overlook the individual. There were critics who held it against him that he involved himself too much in individual spiritual direction and cared too little for the great affairs of being a bishop. As a rebuttal to these critics, he said that a bishop has a responsibility for each member of his diocese; therefore, it was an essential duty of the office of bishop that, in addition to the great responsibilities, he also interest himself in the needs of the individual regardless of how much time or energy this might involve.

The dedication of Francis de Sales to every individual becomes very clear in his letters. It made no difference to him whether he was consoling a woman whose husband recently passed away or whether he had to complete a questionnaire from Rome asking how he would judge a theological argument on the relation between nature and grace. It is precisely in his letters that Francis de Sales shows that he wanted to be all things for all people.

FIVE HOURS SLEEP EACH NIGHT

[July-August 2003]

Four to five hours of sleep per night was nothing unusual for St. Francis de Sales. On the one hand, he did not sleep well and woke often during the night. His many admonitions that one should not become upset by this but rather use these night hours as an occasion to pray certainly lend credence to his own experience. On the other hand, the evening and morning hours were the quietest in his life. He used them to pray, to study, and to write his letters and other documents. At that time he was undisturbed by the noise of daily life as a bishop. He was totally alone and totally with God. And so he used this time in a richly productive way.



Daily Life

Usually Francis de Sales got up at 5:00 am. He devoted his first hours to prayer and to study, after which he celebrated Holy Mass. At the beginning of his episcopacy, he made the decision to spend two hours daily in theological study. Often his breakfast was left untouched for a long time, since his confessional was right next to the entrance to his episcopal church and a line of penitents was waiting to be absolved by the bishop himself.

The afternoon passed quickly, with diverse audiences, talks, and diocesan matters to be dealt with. Many came to him for advice, including prominent jurists who wanted his opinion on cases; political problems also had to be evaluated and in the most diplomatic way resolved. The situation in the Chablais, the constant struggle for money, and the discussions with the Calvinists gave him headaches. In addition he had to deal with the reforms in his diocese and in the cloisters that the Council of Trent had promulgated. Enormous and annoying problems with pastors, abbesses, and priors were regularly on the daily agenda, as was the conflict between the Duke of Savoy and the King of France.

The late afternoon belonged to the sisters of the congregation of the Visitation of Holy Mary, which Francis de Sales founded with Jane de Chantal in 1610. Usually he spent an hour with the sisters in spiritual conversations about their new life. For personal conversations with the sisters, especially with Jane, there was very little time; his duties as bishop simply did not allow for it. Besides all this, the new foundation caused him canonical problems. In order to gain papal recognition for his rapidly growing order, he had to devote time to changes in their constitutions with his immediate superior, the archbishop of Lyons.

After the evening meal, if he were not on a canonical visitation of his diocese or a trip in service of the Duke of Savoy, he found the happiest time. The quiet of the night descended. He would light the candle on his writing table and begin to answer the large correspondence that he received, or he would spend some time writing his book on divine love. That lasted until midnight, when he finally allowed himself some time for sleep.

Vacations

Francis de Sales had stress as a daily companion. He allowed himself no personal time off. The way he understood his episcopal obligation was that it was his God-given duty to dedicate himself totally to the people of his diocese and to the tasks of his office. Only when this duty was fulfilled could he think of himself and his own interests. He allowed himself only

one week annually to spend with his episcopal friend, Jean Pierre Camus. It was what Francis de Sales considered a vacation. Both bishops named this time together as their “octave,” which they spent either in Annecy or in Belley. Francis enjoyed good conversations with this talented literary colleague, for whom he had served as principal consecrator for his ordination as a bishop in 1609.

In view of the lack of time and the stress that characterized his life, Francis de Sales would be a very welcome patron for all today who work under a constant deadline, especially journalists. But, consider that Francis de Sales lived only to the age of 55 and his patronage contains a warning. This patron is not to be imitated in everything! A little more time off would definitely have helped Francis de Sales. Still, all who live with deadlines and stress and would complain about it, will find in him a good listener.



THE TRUTH ENGAGED

[September-October 2003]

On November 15, 1603 Francis de Sales sent a letter to Rome to Pope Clement VIII. It was important, so he wrote, that the Holy Father receive a conscientious and faithful report about what was happening in the church of his area. He excused himself that he had had to take a little longer rest to get his thoughts in order; otherwise, one could declare “as truth what was false and as false what was true.”

Francis de Sales described exactly and in detail what had occurred in his diocese in the past few years, during which the dispute with the Calvinists in the Chablais and in Geneva had played a central role.

From the Love of Truth

Francis de Sales loved the truth. That will become very clear from his letter, even though, out of a sense of modesty, he avoided any mention of his own service in defense of the Catholic faith against the attacks of the Calvinists.

Because of his love for truth, Francis de Sales had gained permission even as a young priest to read the books of these heretics, all of which were included in the index of forbidden books. He wanted to get to the bottom of the truth, and for this reason he needed the knowledge of his own faith laid before him, as well as knowledge of the arguments and thoughts of those who had other opinions and points of view. In his writings, letters and sermons, there is a richness of references to philosophers, theologians, mystics and the Sacred Scriptures. The Bible was for him the basic guarantor of truth, right next to the teaching authority of the Church.

From a love of truth he considered the destruction of someone’s good name a mortal sin, just as sinful as actual physical murder, and so he wrote in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. With the tongue, one could spread clever half-truths among the populace and so kill an opponent just as effectively as with a sword. Back-stabbing and evil gossip are a kind of plague on society, which spreads like an epidemic and develops its own destructive dynamic whose power for harm of body and soul can hardly be underestimated.

It is likewise the case with dissimulation, which is like assenting to lies. His brother Janus fell into disfavor with the Duke of Nemours because he was suspected of having been involved in a plot against a favorite of the duke's. Francis de Sales spoke out strongly against the suspicion not only because it dealt with his own brother, but also because it dealt with truth itself. He wrote in his letter to the duke that if he were to be silent now, then he would be assenting to a lie. When it is a matter of truth, one may not remain silent, not even a bishop.

Truth with Love

But, and this applies to Francis de Sales as well, when it comes to telling someone an unpleasant truth, then one must not omit love. There is a play on words for which he is known: "An unkind truth does not flow from a true kindness." For Francis de Sales, love and truth belong together.

A truth that is not uttered with kindness is to be enjoined with caution. Regarding his disputes with the heretics, Francis de Sales once said that he who preaches with love, preaches more than enough against heretics even if he has not uttered one single word of dispute against them.

In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales wrote: "All joy and satisfaction consists in this: to discover and to recognize the truth about things, and the nobler the truths are the more joyfully and attentively our reason surrenders to their contemplation. Every other desire seemed to pale in consideration with his love for wisdom, for the sake of which honors, riches and, yes, even your home should be sacrificed. One should even tear out his own eyes with quiet resolve and so deny himself forever the joy of the beauty and pleasure of earthly light in order to devote himself by means of spiritual light to the contemplation of truth."

Truth instead of Profits

Journalists should not exactly tear out their eyes when they write their articles! However, a little passion in the love for truth and a little love in the description of truth would stand them in good stead. Francis de Sales, who was dedicated to truth in all his writings, serves as a model precisely in our pluralistic society in which headlines are sought which will increase profits, whether those headlines correspond to the truth or not.

CRITICAL, YES – BUT FULL OF LOVE

[November-December 2003]

The Archbishop of Belley, Jean-Pierre Camus, was a totally different personality than his friend, Francis de Sales. One could easily point out in the personality of these two individuals the truth that opposites attract.

Critical Writer

Camus, who wrote a highly acclaimed biography of Francis de Sales after his death, was not only a bishop but also an extremely popular author. He wrote over forty novels, which



were very successful and widely read. He was especially known for his sharp and pugnacious polemics.

Francis de Sales fully encouraged the literary endeavors of his friend. At the end of the 16th century, shallow knightly adventures were all the rage. They had no particular literary value but were full of immorally suggestive characters. Francis de Sales was of the opinion that such superficial and trivial literature, which corrupted traditional values, should be countered by good writers such as Camus in well-written literature in which Christian values played a prominent role. Francis de Sales advised his friend in strong and often blunt criticism to portray the foibles found in society and in the Church gently and kindly, with an eye toward the dignity of the individual.

Apparently a tendency toward quarrelsomeness and polemics was one of the greatest weaknesses of his episcopal friend. Camus' literary talent led him to a razor sharp but hardhearted criticism. His criticism was essentially correct, but Francis de Sales rejected his method. The method of Francis de Sales in this situation was different. "Whoever's position or vocation demanded that he correct the mistakes of others must try to cook a truth, which is hard to swallow. With a fire of deep love, the criticism will lose its biting edge. Otherwise the correction is like an unripened fruit which causes stomach pains instead of becoming a good and nourishing food."

Criticism Must Be Practiced

Francis de Sales practiced this method of criticism to an admirable degree. He was very much aware of the fact that, as bishop, it was his duty to put into place the decisions of the Council of Trent, to expose the mistakes and faults of others, and to openly bring them to discussion. Often enough during his twenty year tenure as bishop he had to practice such criticism for the sake of the Gospel.

He criticized pastors, who were negligent in the practice of their pastoral duties toward their parish because they visited their families for weeks at some summer castle or other place where they were on vacation. He sharply criticized cloisters, which led an all too free lifestyle behind their cloistered walls, and thus gave grave scandal. He reprimanded political decisions of his duke, because they endangered the reunion of Catholics and Calvinists. He condemned the shameless moneymaking schemes of the Knights of St. Lazarus at the expense of the poor and impoverished populace. He did not shy away from speaking out against the dissolute life of King Henry IV of France or the squabbles between King Louis XIII and his mother, Maria de Medici.

He also addressed the petty faults and scandals in the local world of his family, of his Diocese of Geneva-Annecy, and of the recipients of his letters. He demanded improvement. He exhorted a married gentleman who was prepared to admit to the serious sin of dueling, the married woman who spent more than was necessary for her station in life on clothes and jewelry, or people who seemed to want nothing more than to be in constant litigation with their neighbors. However, these outspoken criticisms were always delivered with love and a great respect for the individual.

In regards to Jean-Pierre Camus, Francis de Sales' conviction about the subject of criticism was clearly expressed in the following words: "Criticism has as part of its nature a certain bitterness. But sugar it with gentleness, cook it with the fire of love, and then it will seem completely from the heart, filled with love and delicious to the taste." And then he added the following famous sentence: "You can catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a barrel of vinegar."

A Different Kind of Criticism

If one looks through the numerous offerings of the media today, it is readily apparent that this basic Salesian perspective of loving criticism is very often ignored. The dignity of the individual is dragged through the dirt quite often. Objective arguments no longer hold center place; rather, the ridicule and humiliation of individuals who have committed mistakes is more important. The cry of Rudi Vollers, the coach of the German National Soccer Team, at the beginning of September 2003 and the great wave of reaction to the often-insulting criticism of journalists can easily stand as a proof of this frame of mind.

Nevertheless, Francis de Sales is patron of writers and journalists because of a different kind of criticism and correction. Above all, when criticism is warranted in the situation, we must remember to “condemn the sin not the sinner.” Even when being critical, the person of the individual must be protected as much as possible. It would certainly be a fitting time for all journalists to learn this lesson, as we celebrate the 80th anniversary of the naming of Francis de Sales as patron of journalists.
