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**ON ST. FRANCIS DE SALES
POPE PAUL VI**



Apostolic Letter
on the Fourth Centenary
of the
Birth of St. Francis de Sales
Doctor of the Church

January 29, 1967

Beloved Sons and Venerable Brothers, Greetings and Apostolic Blessings:

St. Francis de Sales, the gem of Savoy and Switzerland, is the very great glory of Annecy—a town famous for its mountains, its lakes and its surroundings and even more for its historical monuments both sacred and profane—because the nearby village of Thorens glories in being his birthplace. As this year will mark the fourth centenary of his birth, the praiseworthy decision was taken there to honor his memory with public festivities and various ceremonies.

Of these festivities we were given timely announcement by the venerable brother Jean Sauvage, Bishop of Annecy, who also informed us that in view of the greatness of the saint and the importance of the event he intended to invite the largest possible number of bishops of France and other countries to take part in the commemoration and in the common rejoicings.

We praise and fully approve what was done by the solicitous pastor. Indeed, following the example of our predecessor, Pius XI of happy memory, who honored the third centenary of the death of St. Francis de Sales with the Encyclical *Rerum Omnium*, we too, beloved sons and venerable brothers, wish to send you this letter to show to everyone that, in accordance with the desire of the Bishop of Annecy, we willingly take part in these celebrations and that we wish them a most happy outcome. And we do it wholeheartedly because ever since a tender age and then in mature years we have always particularly venerated the illustrious Bishop of Geneva and are therefore most pleased to add splendor to his name.

We therefore warmly exhort you to honor on this happy occasion the doctor of divine love and of evangelical gentleness with wise reflection and intense, true piety. Our heart gives us the hope that this will produce much fruit.

In your regions the holy doctor of the Church was always a burning and resplendent lamp;¹ its heavenly splendor radiated from there and still offers ample material for study. This was because he was above all yours, because he left profound memories of himself in Paris, in Lyons, in Burgundy, in Geneva and in Turin, and especially in Savoy. Owing to a natural bond with these illustrious lands, he influenced the feelings and the mode of Christian life, of even the men who were the most outstanding for their virtue, as few and perhaps none of his own time and of those that followed, had ever done.

There is no doubt that by the example of his virtues, by the prudence of his advice and by his ascetic teaching, he had great influence as teacher of the French clergy and led to the reflowering

there of the true priestly spirit, while stimulating in no negligible way St. Vincent de Paul to found the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. He helped and preceded with his great authority and the inventive flame of his superior intelligence, the three educators of that clergy: Pierre de Berulle, St. John Eudes and Jean Olier.

In fact, great is his teaching and his authority in your regions, where spirituality and customs everywhere clearly reflect the gentleness of de Sales. Therefore his memory re-emerges now like a star; by attracting to itself the eyes and meditation, will it not dispense generously light, warmth, wisdom and mildness? Certainly, all the more so since for various reasons he seems to be of real interest today.

Ecclesiastic history clearly shows that ecumenical councils gave full results in keeping with hopes when either during their celebration or afterward, holy ecclesiastics and pastors of illustrious virtue sought to make themselves into living and speaking law and to fulfil the will and the deliberations of the council.

All the best Christians ardently desire today that such men, outstanding for sanctity, should arise to shine and combat. Perhaps the dawn of this splendid day is about to rise among you.

However, it is necessary to have confidence; we have a guide, an adviser, a teacher who will help and precede you and be with you, many other brothers in the episcopate. By going before you, he will help you to accomplish integrally the work of salvation and sanctification.

We are certain that truth, in whose knowledge there is rejoicing, will convince everyone, once it is studied. None of the recent doctors of the Church knew more or better than St. Francis de Sales how to anticipate, with the profound intuition of his wisdom, the deliberations of the Council. He will give aid by the example of his life, the abundance of a pure and healthy teaching and his secure method of spirituality, which is open for the Christian perfection of persons of any status or condition.

Three things propose themselves: to imitate, to embrace, to follow. If we then consider the nature and the form of the virtues of St. Francis de Sales, it is difficult to describe them, because their nature and their most outstanding characteristic do not appear at first sight and with absolute certainty. Star differs from star, gem from gem, one tree from another and each beauty is marked by qualities of its own.

Beauty is most resplendent and perfect when a variety of many beauties merge in it harmoniously. Thus in the luxuriant growth of a garden, the grasses, the trees, the flowers stand out for their beauty, their fragrance and their color, but the garden seems more beautiful to the eye if right proportions and a suitable design add beauty to beauty in perfect harmony so that the loveliness and the amiable charm of the distinct beauties stand out even more clearly as a whole.

What we like and admire in Francis de Sales is this association, this complex, of virtues.

We therefore spontaneously apply to him what St. Gregory Nazianzen said in an ardent speech about St. Athanasius: "By exalting Athanasius, I exalt virtue because to speak of him is to praise virtue since he possessed, or rather possesses, all the virtues, summed up together. Indeed all live for God, both those who live according to God, as well as those who may have left this life." ²

Acute intuition of the mind, strong and clear intelligence, penetrating judgment, incredible gentleness and goodness, smiling sweetness of appearance and speech, quiet ardor of an ever-active spirit, rare simplicity of life not without a modest pride in his lineage, serene and tranquil peacefulness, an ever steady and secure moderation not disjoined from strength—gentleness comes from those who are strong—which enabled him to love tenderly but also to be strong and to achieve his aim; sublime nobility of mind and love of beauty, desirous of giving others the supreme good—heaven and poetry. Almost infinite zeal for souls and love for God which precedes all his other virtues like a most resplendent sun. The overabundance of divine grace added to and sublimated all

these gifts. These are the main lines which, together with other similar ones, trace the sublime figure of Francis de Sales.

With these gifts of nature and of grace he consecrated himself entirely to the Church and with manifold attentions made fruitful the field which had been entrusted to him. He exercised his pastoral ministry even in the midst of perils and treachery, wrote books full of wisdom, reinstated sacred eloquence and let it flow like a broad river, led many monasteries back from lost discipline to full vigor of religious observance and together with St. Jeanne Françoise de Chantal, who was linked to him by a bond of spiritual and supernatural friendship, founded the Institute of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This institute, his most illustrious charge and glory, experienced such a splendid flowering by divine grace that when he left this life there was a large number of convents of that name.

He displayed all his zeal in cultivating and promoting sanctity everywhere, considering that this was the best way to help the Church in his century—contaminated by corruption. Thus he handed down to posterity an example and a teaching which they could constantly contemplate.

No less illustrious than the sanctity of his life were the teachings he left us, so suitable for the needs of our times. Here are some of the principal ones which are the pivot of many others.

The Church, in the course of time, cannot shine in its sanctity without the ornament of holy priests. And the priest, more than any other Christian, is another Christ. His sanctity radiates from Christ, the eternal priest who perfects faith, and becomes thus the living sign of the grace of Christ. Sincere devotion to the Virgin Mother of God becomes necessary to every faithful person, but above all to the priest because in addition to all the other singular benefits, she is the model of our love for God, for Christ and for the Church. She who is the sweetest among all, the model of grace, the example of every virtue, represents most clearly the ideal of evangelical perfection.

In the choir of virtues primacy goes to charity not only because it is the most important but also because it gives efficacy and harmony to the others, since virtue is the order of love. By the law of the Creator the soul presides over the body in man. Will, which has love as its ruler and artificer, excels among the faculties of the soul. By charity, therefore, when it is resplendent and ardent and active, we touch the summit of evangelical perfection, we unite ourselves closely to God, the supreme good and the fount of beatitude. And, since God is charity we become similar to God by participating in His nature. Through the body of Christ, that is to say the Church in heaven and on earth, we are joined together by charity, we are kept united by this common bond.

The famous "Treatise of the love of God" is rightly summarized by this celebrated definition of charity: "Charity is a love of friendship, a friendship of spiritual love, a spiritual love of preference, but of an incomparable, supreme and supernatural preference which is like a sun in the entire soul to embellish it with its rays, in all the spiritual faculties to perfect them, in all the powers to govern them, but in the will as it sees to inhabit it and make it prefer and love God above all things. Blessed the soul which is suffused with this holy spiritual love because with it comes every kind of good." ³

It seems fitting to explain here briefly why St. Francis de Sales is a modern doctor and so in keeping with modern times. He must be described as an original and modern doctor not because he breaks the links of continuity with the more ancient ones. Indeed, his teaching adheres radically to the faith of the Church, sacred tradition and to the teachings of the holy Fathers. And then in the ascetic and mystical field he draws not a little particularly from St. Ignatius of Loyola, from the Blessed John of Avila, from Louis of Granada, from St. Theresa of Avila, from St. John of the Cross—indirectly—and from the thought of the Italian teachers of ascetics.

He tries, however, to show the old teaching under a new light, to place it wisely in the service of modern life, adapting it to its manifold necessities. There is no doubt that he also enlists the help of art for progress from truth to good along a path strewn

with the flowers of pure beauty. He was in fact formed at the school of Giovanni Maldonato in Paris and of Antonio Possevino at Padua, and had acquired a profound literary culture.

He knows, therefore, how to combine humanism with research and mystical accent and how to develop in himself and in his disciples a gradual and harmonious heightening of all the human faculties.⁴

This does not mean that the sense of beauty develops spontaneously in the flower of mystics but that the love of God descending from above does not destroy the natural faculties but indeed elevates them, orders and harmonizes them with one another and expresses vividly every form of beauty and the whole perfection of human nature.

Therefore, rather than a "devout humanism," his should be called a "Christocentric superhumanism," since it is close in all its aspects to the integral sanctity which is in keeping with man. And since we are talking about sanctity, it is fitting to mention here briefly and to correct the opinion of those who believe that the true sanctity, such as is proposed by the Catholic Church, does not concern or commit all the Christians but only a few, taken either individually or associated with others by means of religious vows.

This old error reappears in the abstruse or open cavils of some who, disconcerted and disconcerting, make a false distinction between Christian perfection and evangelical perfection and trace absurd distances between the acts of charity of monks, of priests and of laymen or else distort into false interpretations the decrees of the recent ecumenical council, in which everything is clearly sanctioned and vividly hoped that all the faithful and all categories of laymen will reach out with an undivided heart to the sanctity of life⁵ since divine grace offers them this possibility.

These various forms of sanctity are proposed by the holy Bishop of Geneva under the significant name of devotion. "Love of God when it makes us elevate ourselves to Him with frequency, promptness and elan is called devotion."⁶

St. Francis de Sales insistently exhorts and urges all, however different in sex, wealth and condition, that, inflamed by holy desires, they may feel and experience this devotion.

Sanctity is not a prerogative of one or another social class. The pressing invitation, "Rise higher, friend,"⁷ is addressed to all Christians. All are bound by the obligation to climb the mountain of God even though not all by the same way. "Devotion must be exercised in different ways by the gentleman, by the artisan, by the waiter, by the prince, by the widow, by the young woman, by the bride. And more: the practice of devotion must be in keeping with the strength, with the affairs and with the duties of each. Tell me, Philothea, would it be suitable for the bishop to live the solitary life of a Carthusian? And if husbands did not want to set aside any more money than Capuchins do, if the artisan spent the whole day in church as the religious does, or if the religious were exposed daily to all sorts of meetings in the service of his fellow beings, like a bishop, would not this devotion be ridiculous, disordered and unbearable? No, Philothea, devotion, when it is true, does not spoil anything but indeed perfects everything. But when it becomes contrary to the legitimate commitments of each, it is certainly false."⁸

It would be fitting in this respect to recall another most beautiful sentence of his with which he interprets allegorically the command God gave to the earth to bring forth the green herb that its seed and fruit trees may yield fruit after their kind.⁹ "Do we not see by experience that trees and fruit do not have their proper growth and maturity except when they produce the grains and the seeds which serve for the production of herbs and of trees of the same species? Thus our virtues do not have their proper measure and sufficiency until they produce in us desires of progress which, like spiritual seed, serve to produce new degrees of virtue. And it seems to me that the soil of our heart has received the order to bring forth the herbs of virtue to bear the fruit of the holy works, each according to its species. All these have the order to bring forth desires and decisions for growth, for daily progress

in perfection. The virtue which does not have the grain and the seed of these desires is not at all sufficient and mature.”¹⁰

In the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism it is laid down: “It is essential that the doctrine be clearly presented in its entirety. Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false irenicism which harms the purity of Catholic doctrine and obscures its assured genuine meaning. . . . Furthermore, in ecumenical dialogue, Catholic theologians standing fast by the teaching of the Church yet searching together with separated brethren into the divine mysteries, should do so with love for the truth, with charity and with humility. When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or “hierarchy” of truth, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.”¹¹ In dealing with the heterodox, St. Francis de Sales anticipated by centuries our times and our habits. His method follows a luminous line which should still be followed today. In him is found a supreme integrity of life, supreme mildness and benignity. He is never violent in dispute, he loves those who err while he corrects the errors, and if his positions are different he never has recourse to polemic opposition but draws the lamp close to the lamp. Tenacious in loving, in praying and in illuminating, he knows how to wait patiently for a long time and how to lead those who err gradually back to the fullness of truth from which none may move away and none is allowed to diminish. And what were his fruits? Through his work, in the province of Chalons-sur-Saone alone 72,000 men returned to unity with the Apostolic See.

He had a singular disposition for writing, no less than for discussing. What abundance of doctrine in the books he compiled, what clarity of thought, what innate charm, what splendid elegance! The argument develops harmoniously, and the reading is supremely pleasant, instructive, stimulating.

When he writes, as when he preached to the people, his readers as once his listeners have but one fear: that it may end too soon. His word possesses the highest gift of oratory, the constant vivacity that Pindar has so splendidly expressed: “If one

expresses himself in an outstanding way, his words have an immortal echo; they soar over most fertile lands and the sea and the light of illustrious deeds is an unextinguishable ray.”¹²

Given to Catholic writers and journalists as their efficacious heavenly patron, may he remind them by example and direct them by authority so that—never misleading for reasons of profit, nor betrayed by prejudice, but imbued by the spirit of Christ and honest followers of truth—they may fulfill their duty for the common good and may deserve well of the Catholic faith whose servants they are. By acting thus they will comply in a praiseworthy way with the Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication (chapter 14) of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and will not sorrowfully betray the hope and the expectation placed in them.

A most important trait would now be missing in the true image of the holy Bishop of Geneva if we did not speak of his excellent and rich doctrine on the mystery of the Church, of its amplitude, of its nature and authority. How loving was his reverence—a gift common to all saints—and how was his constant and amiable zeal full of respect toward the Church, the mother and teacher, where the doctrine of truth is placed on the Chair of Unity!

What the foundations of the Church are and where they are he declared with such certainty as to serve considerably for the clear interpretation of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (On the Church) of the Ecumenical Council. Leaving aside other passages we quote this one:

“Our Lord is foundation and founder, foundation with no other foundation, foundation of the natural, Mosaic and evangelical Church, perpetual and immortal foundation, foundation of the militant and triumphant Church, foundation of Himself, of our faith, hope and charity and of the value of the sacraments. St. Peter is the foundation and not the founder of the entire Church, foundation but founded by another foundation which is our Lord, foundation of the only evangelical Church, foundation subject to succession, foundation of the militant Church, not of the triumphant Church, foundation through participation, foundation of

service not of domination and in no way foundation of our faith, hope and charity, nor of the value of the sacraments.

“Nevertheless, in authority and in government St. Peter has surpassed all the others to the same extent to which the head surpasses the limbs. Since he was made ordinary pastor and supreme head of the Church, the others were pastors sent and designated in other parts of the Church with power and authority over the entire Church as full as St. Peter’s, except that St. Peter was their common head and their pastor and the pastor of entire Christianity.

“Thus they were the foundation of the Church with him and like him as regards the conversion of souls and doctrine; but as regards authority and government they were (the foundation of the Church) in a different way because St. Peter was the ordinary head not only of the other parts of the entire Church but also of the apostles. In fact, Our Lord had built on him His entire Church, of which they were not only the parts, but the principal and most noble parts.”¹³

It is also very fitting to meditate with intelligent judgment and profound reflection on the similarity which Francis de Sales suggests between Abraham and St. Peter. One as well as the other is a rock, father of believers, father of many peoples, that is to say, of a posterity promised—as prize for faith in Christ—to the one as sands of the sea and a multitude of stars shining in heaven, to the other as an immense flock. “Because if Abraham was so called for the fact that he was to be the father of many peoples, St. Peter received this name because on him, as on a solid rock, was to be founded the multitude of Christians. Because of this resemblance, St. Bernard calls the dignity of St. Peter the Patriarchate of Abraham.”¹⁴

With these profound aspirations, with these life purposes, with this full affirmation of integral Catholic faith, add as much splendor as you can to the celebrations of the fourth centenary of the birth of St. Francis de Sales. In the mutual bond of the communion of the saints the great Doctor—fount of light for the holy Church—will respond to our homage with the help of his merits and of his powerful and compassionate prayer to God.

