



St. Francis de Sales: His Legacy

by Lewis S. Fiorelli, OSFS

On December 8, 1602, during the ceremony in which he was ordained the Bishop of Geneva, Francis de Sales had a religious experience which was to set the apostolic agenda for the rest of his life. Later he described this experience to his spiritual friend and fellow saint, Jane de Chantal: "God had taken me out of myself in order to take me to Himself, and then He gave me back to the people. That is, He converted me from what I was for myself into what I was to be for them."

God took Francis out of himself in order to take him to Himself. In this action, Francis experienced in a special manner what is meant to be the single most important goal of every person: union with God for whom the human heart is created. He taught this truth to the people of his day, and particularly to the laity to whose spiritual nourishment he was especially dedicated. He did this by preaching, by spiritual guidance, by catechizing, and by writing religious classics such as the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God* which are still read with great spiritual profit almost four hundred years later.

The principal means to union with God, he taught, are prayer, both personal and liturgical; frequent use of the sacraments; and a generously creative openness to the divine will as it is made known by the duties inherent in each person's state in life, as well as by the demands of charity as revealed in each succeeding present moment.

Union with God is a personally transforming experience. It results in a deep inner peace which is manifested by a spirit of joyful optimism even in the midst of difficulty and challenge.

After taking Francis to Himself, God returned him to the people. This taught Francis that one is to leave union with God to go out to others in a generous sharing of the benefits of that transforming union. He did this by a life of apostolic zeal.

An early expression of this apostolic zeal manifested itself when, as a newly ordained priest, he volunteered for a difficult and dangerous missionary assignment in the Chablais region along the southern border of Lake Lemman (Lake Geneva). The Chablais was then a Calvinist stronghold and militantly anti-Catholic. After four years of tireless missionary activity, the whole region returned to the Catholic faith.

This generous apostolic spirit continued when Francis became bishop. He gave himself totally to his people. Preaching frequently, he visited every town and hamlet of his mountainous diocese, often on foot or by horseback. He taught catechism to the youth of Annecy, his episcopal city-in-exile. He enjoyed playing the clown for them, thereby more easily winning their young hearts to Christ.

Like ours, his was a post-conciliar outlook. Conscientiously he implemented the decrees of the Council of Trent and modeled its ideal of a resident bishop, personally seeing to the theological education of his clergy and the spiritual and sacramental nourishment of his people.

While preaching the Lenten series in Dijon in 1604, Francis met a young widow and mother of four, Jane de Chantal. He became her spiritual guide and together they later founded a new religious order of women, the Visitation of Holy Mary. Its spirit is one of deep interior prayer, warm community living, and the practice of the little virtues of mutual charity, humility, gentleness and simplicity.

The friendship between these two saints is celebrated throughout the Church today as an outstanding example of how deeply satisfying human relationships can, when centered in Christ, lead to great sanctity as well.

A major arena for Francis' apostolic zeal was the spiritual guidance of men and women from every walk of life. He was a master of this spiritual art. He respected the primary role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the life of each person, and deeply regarded each one's unique dignity and inalienable freedom. These were principal characteristics of his spiritual guidance. They led him to make use of persuasion, never force, in his attempts to win hearts to God. Francis was

convinced that this is how God had dealt with us in Christ. It has become identified with what is now known as the Salesian spirit.

Francis died in Lyons on December 28, 1622, a still young but utterly spent man. Following the impulse of his religious experience in 1602, he had given himself throughout life to God in intimate prayer and had left God only to serve God's people by living among them as Jesus had: in filial obedience to the Father's will in self-less service to God's people, and always in gentleness and humility of heart.