In *A World Waiting to Be Born*, the popular psychologist M. Scott Peck claims in his opening chapter that "Something Is Seriously Wrong" with our modern world. That something, he argues, is the ever-growing phenomenon of "incivility" or being hurtful to others. In this day and age, where the concern for oneself above all others breeds an infectious materialism and a callous disregard for life, the practice of a true civility — the awareness of and intention to be genuinely good to others — is surely lacking, both in our interpersonal relationships and in our societal institutions.

Four centuries ago another popular writer, **Francis de Sales** (1567-1622) envisioned a world re-born already through the love of God. Francis' vision of this world is founded on a deep appreciation of the love that God has showered upon us through the gifts of creation and human life, particularly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Francis believed that beauty and goodness are the hallmarks of our world, as gifts born from God's deep and abiding love for each one of us. Enabled and ennobled by this love, we are capable of much more than we might well imagine. We are capable of living a true life of devotion in this world. We are capable of giving birth to a new world.

Francis' spirit has permeated the Christian world. His life story, his written treasury, and his religious legacy — all point to the virtuous qualities of a man imbued with the love of God and desirous of sharing that love with all who would seek it. Known affectionately as "the gentleman saint," Francis models for us a type of civility that has God as its origin and its goal. Indeed, his spirit of "practical holiness" fills the pages of his life's story.

**Francis' Story**

In the papal decree by which Francis was named a "Doctor of the Church," Pope Pius XI praises the saint "not only for the sublime holiness of life which he achieved, but also for the wisdom with which he directed souls in the way of sanctity" (*Rerum omnium perturbationem*, 4). Though renowned for his many accomplishments in a relatively short life, Francis remains an attractive companion for the spiritual journey due to his profoundly simple approach to the divine events of everyday life.
A Humanistic Education

Francis was born in 1567, at a time when the great flowering of the Renaissance blossomed throughout Europe. Growing up in the environs of Savoy (in the region of what is now southeastern France and western Switzerland), he was surrounded by the beauties of nature, from the majestic Alps to the serene Lake of Geneva. In such surroundings, he could not help but be stirred to soulful wonder at the goodness present in all of creation through the beneficence of the Creator.

As the eldest of thirteen children raised in a family of nobility, Francis was educated in the finest traditions of humanism and the liberal arts. At the College de La Roche-sur-Foron, the young Francis (age 6) was tutored by Fr. Déage to bear the qualities of "docility, facility in learning, and piety" (Ravier, Sage and Saint, p. 20) Three years later, at the Chappuchin College in Annecy, he began his formal studies, with an emphasis on learning French language and literature. Having received the sacraments of Communion and Confirmation during this time, Francis also began his life-long devotion to the Church. That devotion was soon to be tested during his studies at the Clermont College, a Jesuit school in Paris where he was sent in 1578. There he pursued the "arts" of education (the classics, humanities, rhetoric, etc.) and of nobility (horsemanship, fencing, dancing, etc.), learning all that was expected of a young gentleman. But he also undertook, on his own, the study of theology. In 1586, after listening to the learned debates at the Sorbonne on the notion of predestination, Francis found himself mired in a personal "crisis" in which he feared that he would be eternally damned. Then and there he resolved to serve God completely throughout the whole of his life. For a young man of twenty years, this event was to become the defining moment in his life, one that would color his optimistic vision of the world and influence the hope-filled character of his writings.

After a brief return to his native Savoy, Francis then continued his studies at the University of Padua. There, in 1592, he would earn doctoral degrees in both civil and canon law. There, too, he continued his independent study of theology, under the direction of Antonio Possevino, a famous Jesuit. At this time, Francis composed the Spiritual Exercises, a rule of life for himself which he would later modify for his spiritual children. With such an extraordinary education, he was soon admitted to the bar and named a senator, steps along the way of his father's dream for a successful diplomatic career. But the providential God would have other plans for this young nobleman.

What characterizes the education of this saint might well be described as a "natural goodness." Inspired by the beauty of the land around him, Francis would come to realize that the world is essentially good, that all things participate in the beauty and goodness of the Creator, and that human life itself was ordered to this beauty and goodness of God as its ultimate end. In our world today, scientific discoveries and technological breakthroughs reflect the potential of creation. Yet, at the same time, these powerful advances run the risk of fragmenting our lives. The holistic and humanistic education that Francis received, and which he would later promote, serves to remind us of the over-arching plan of salvation that God has in store for our world as it waits to be re-born.

The Priest-Missionary

Declining the opportunities arranged by his father to become a powerful diplomat, Francis was named Provost of the cathedral chapter of Geneva and ordained to the priesthood at age twenty-six. His first assignment was to restore Catholicism to the region of the Chablais (in modern Switzerland).
The duchy of Savoy suffered the ravages of political wars, among them an invasion by the king of France (in 1536) and the later battles to return the land to the duke (during 1589-1598). In religious terms, though, the region of the Chablais was the land of Calvinism. With the advent of the Reformation there, the Catholic bishop of Geneva had been exiled (to nearby Annecy). Now, with Geneva as its leading city and Theodore de Beze as Calvin's successor, the populace of that territory was decidedly anti-papist. "Of the some twenty-five thousand souls who inhabited the area, only about a hundred Catholics remained. All the others passed — either by choice or by force — into Protestantism" (Ravier, *Sage and Saint*, p. 62).

Amid the political-religious hostilities of this environment, Francis undertook the personally challenging effort to reach out to the common people. Journeying at risk of life and limb, and celebrating the Mass despite public indifference or hostility, he established contacts with the people by writing little pamphlets and placing them under doors or on street posts. In this way, little by little, he initiated open discussions about the truths of religion. Two more works, apologetic in nature, would flow from his pen at this time: the *Catholic Controversy* and the *Defense of the Standard of the Holy Cross*.

Engaging the citizens of the land on their own terms, he slowly but assuredly led them to a reconsideration of their beliefs. Eventually, after continued writing and prominent debates with the Calvinist leaders, Francis was able to convert the majority of the inhabitants of that region. Commemorating this missionary success, both the Duke of Savoy and the legate of Pope Clement VIII (Cardinal de Medici) recognized the extraordinary "dedication to the Catholic Faith and … zeal for the salvation of souls" which the young priest demonstrated (Ravier, *Sage and Saint*, p. 85). That dedication and zeal would soon spread far and wide.

Perhaps the secret of his missionary success came from Francis' sincere efforts to "dialogue" with everyone. In the midst of conflict and danger, his peaceful pursuit of the truth elicited from one and all alike a profound respect and a sympathetic hearing. In a world today, where religion and politics often form a combustible combination, a similar search for truth may help combat the prevailing mindset of a pluralism that values only an "openness" to all ideas, regardless of their validity. And, in our contemporary pursuit of religious and social unity, the respect for the goodness of the other person championed by the young priest serves to remind us of what is essential in our common life.

**The Bishop of Geneva**

Having completed his work in the Chablais, Francis returned to Annecy, where he was soon appointed coadjutor bishop. Four years later, in 1602, he was consecrated Bishop of Geneva. At this time, the Church was in the process of appropriating the teachings of the Council of Trent in response to the Protestant Reformation.

The new bishop took it upon himself to educate his diocese in the doctrines of the Church. As the prominent religious figure in the region, Francis preached quite often and his sermons became known for their manifold eloquence. Yet, he endeavored to foster the faith beyond the confines of the church buildings. He organized diocesan synods and initiated the practice of parish visitations. He also formed a Confraternity of Christian Doctrine and personally taught the catechism classes. His zeal for
imparting knowledge was such that he even invented a type of sign language by which he taught a young man who was born deaf. Later he co-founded the Florimontane Academy, a pre-cursor to today's French Academy, where humanistic scholars of all interests could engage in discussion.

Francis' achievements garnered national recognition and he was invited to preach and teach throughout France. Though he declined an offer to become archbishop of Paris, his travels led him to encounters with Jane de Chantal, Vincent de Paul, and others who would later play significant roles in the promotion of the spiritual life.

In his pastoral work as shepherd of the diocese, Francis put into practice what may seem to many a commonplace idea. He emphasized a very direct and personal "contact" with the people in his care, commoner and scholar alike. In today's world of affairs, where levels of bureaucracy can be daunting and discouraging, the administrative example of the Bishop of Geneva serves to remind us that our faith is not simply an academic exercise or merely an institutional affiliation. Rather, to give birth to the world of God's love, faith is to be lived in the midst of the world, in the concrete and everyday lives of people in the world. There Francis was right at home. There Francis invites us to dwell.

**The Spiritual Director**

The religious reformation that took place during Francis' time brought with it a confusion over the truths of religion. People of all walks of life were searching for some direction. Due to his many contacts with people in his diocese and beyond, Francis was ardently sought after for spiritual counsel.

He responded to these spiritual seekers in a simple, yet impressive way. Francis wrote letters — thousands of letters! Because of his hectic schedule as spiritual leader of the diocese, he would often have to steal time in the morning or before bed just to reply to the many queries which the faithful would pose. It is estimated that he wrote over 10,000 such letters, but most have been destroyed. From the letters that are preserved, we get a glimpse of the profound simplicity of this spiritual director. Whether writing to members of religious orders, well-to-do nobles, or even simple laborers, Francis faithfully gave instructions on a wide variety of issues affecting the daily lives of believers: from raising children to fulfilling duties and dealing with death. And it was precisely in the midst of these otherwise mundane affairs that Francis taught his spiritual children to find God. Ever humble and always encouraging, his letters of spiritual direction endeared him to all who sought his wisdom.

One of those with whom Francis shared spiritual advice deserves particular mention — **JANE DE CHANTAL**. A young widow with four children, Jane met Francis when he was preaching the Lenten sermons in Dijon in 1604. Inspired by this holy man, as he was also inspired with a divine vision, Jane eventually convinced Francis to become her spiritual director. Through written correspondence, and by means of personal encounters whenever their travels would permit, these two saints entered into a spiritual friendship that would blossom and bear fruit in the living legacy now known as Salesian spirituality.

What his letters of spiritual direction reveal is Francis' "inspired common sense" (Stopp, *Selected Letters*, pp. 33-34) and his keen awareness of the "practical" dimension to holiness. Always drawing on the positive, he was able to teach people to find God wherever they were and to love God in whatever they
were doing. Along the way, Francis exemplified the virtues of true spiritual friendship, building relationships that had as their foundation and focus the common desire to love God more and more. In a world where interpersonal relationships so often are superficial or directed only to self-serving aims, Francis' advice and example demonstrate for us the value of relationships centered on divine love.

The Devotional Writer

From his informal letters, Francis quickly gained a reputation as a masterful communicator of things spiritual. His popularity was such that the recipients of these letters cajoled him to publish lengthier works on the subject of Christian life in the world. Among his many writings, two deserve particular mention as spiritual classics.

The first — an *Introduction to the Devout Life* — was published in 1609 and was the forerunner of what the Second Vatican Council would later teach as the "universal call to holiness." This book, addressed to the fictional "Philothea" (a soul loving, or in love with, God), proposes a simple yet at that time revolutionary idea, namely, that devotion is possible in every state and condition of life. As Francis wrote in the preface,

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. … I shall show to such [persons] that … a strong, resolute soul can live in the world without being infected by any of its moods, find sweet springs of piety amid its salty waves, and fly through the flames of earthly lusts without burning the wings of its holy desires for a devout life. (pp. 33-34)

Francis constructed this spiritual primer on the edifice of the Ignatian exercises with which he was familiar from his Jesuit education. Following upon a series of meditations designed to bring one to embrace the resolution to lead a devout life, Francis then expounds upon this life with his personal instructions concerning prayer and the sacraments, the practice of virtue, the struggle against temptations, and the renewal of one's life.

The second work — his *Treatise on the Love of God* — was published in 1616 and is a more far-reaching and thorough attempt at analyzing the workings of divine love in human life. Supported by a sound philosophy and psychology of the human person, and annotated with explanations from the bible and examples from the world of nature, this treatise seeks to spell out in detail the quest for the soul's union with the will of God, as learned through meditation and contemplation. Though not as widely circulated as the *Introduction*, this book, together with his many other writings, constitute a written legacy that can be trusted to lead readers surely and certainly along the way to God.

The popularity of Francis' writing may be attributed to two factors. On the one hand, his instructions on the devout life are filled with great spiritual imagination. Acknowledged as a literary genius in his own right, Francis is able to paint meaning with words and to convey truth through metaphoric language. On the other hand, this imaginative power is clearly directed to a practical end. His writings address the common needs of everyday people, and he teaches them that the profound mysteries of God's love can
be appropriated in the virtues of everyday living. In a world today which is inundated with questionable messages carried by film and television, the imaginative writings of Francis de Sales offer a treasure of spiritual wisdom that anyone and everyone can count on.

The Founding Father

Francis' emphasis on the possibility of devotion for those "in the world" was at odds with the prevailing thought of his day. At that time, many believed that holiness was only possible for those who would withdraw themselves from the world. This religious "dualism" — splitting the world of God from the human world — was evident in the various forms of religious life, where men and women left the cities for convents and monasteries, there to become holy as only they could do. Here, again, Francis' novel vision of the world would bring new light.

In 1610, together with Jane de Chantal, Francis founded the Visitation of Holy Mary, a religious order of women whose aim was the life of charity exemplified in the Virgin Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. This new order was uniquely conceived. It was established not on the traditional vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, but always and everywhere on charity: "We have no bond but the bond of love," Francis wrote in the Book of Profession. And, rather than focusing on the stringent practices of mortification common to religious orders of the time, these sisters would actually go out into the city, to visit and care for the sick. This new religious lifestyle attracted many women who would not otherwise have been able to join the convent; older women, widows, even the disabled were given access to this way of life. Though for other reasons it eventually became a cloistered order, the Visitation would give rise to "apostolic" communities of religious and would spread the Salesian spirit in numerous religious orders, secular institutes and pious societies that still exist today.

This revolution in the religious life was inspired by Francis' constant attention to the mystery of God in the ordinary events of human activity. This vision inspired his instructions to the sisters in The Spiritual Conferences, as well as the formulation of the Spiritual Directory that was at the heart of life in the Visitation monasteries. In this guide, Francis encourages us to consider the presence of God in every activity of our day, from our rising in the morning to sleeping at night. From this "attention" to God, we can then direct our "intention" to serving God well in all that we do. Considering the declining number of religious vocations today, this simple vision enlightens the ever-increasing role that lay persons are called to play in the modern world and offers them a practical guide to fulfilling the Christian vocation.

The Saintly Patron

Francis' renown as a spiritual leader, and the spread of Visitation monasteries to other cities, led him upon many travels. His last, in November of 1622, was to Avignon, there to meet with both the king of France and the duke of Savoy. From there, the parties would journey to Lyons, where the princes and their courts were welcomed with triumphal fanfare. For his part, Francis retired to the hospitality of the Visitation monastery. There, on December 28, he passed to eternity, after fifty-five years on earth and twenty as bishop of Geneva.
Francis was beatified after only forty years and was canonized by Pope Alexander VII in 1665. His legacy of pastoral solicitude was given appreciation in 1854 when Pope Pius IX declared him Patron of the Deaf. His treasure of spiritual counsel was given approbation in 1877 when the same pope declared him a Doctor of the Church. Finally, his artful ability to communicate the truths of the faith was given recognition in 1923 when Pope Pius XI declared him Patron of Catholic Journalists and of the Catholic Press.