



PAPAL DOCUMENTS ABOUT SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

POPE PIUS IX

Dives in misericordia Deus

apostolic letter to the universal Church

proclaiming St. Francis de Sales a "Doctor of the Church"

16 November 1877

(translated by Rev. Daniel G. Gambet, OSFS)

The all merciful God who has never failed his Church in its struggles with this world and who wisely provides timely help when various vicissitudes arise, although in the sixteenth century because of his displeasure he punished Christian people and permitted many provinces of Europe to be overcome by the darkness of heresies raging far and wide, unwilling to reject his own people he prudently raised up new and holy luminaries by whose excellence distinguished sons of the church were strengthened in the truth and the heretics themselves were gently restored to a love of the truth. Among these distinguished men Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, exemplar of renowned holiness and teacher of true and pious doctrine stood out. Both through his words and his writings, which will endure for all time, he struck down the sinister errors rising up at the time; he defended the faith; he put vice to flight; he improved standards of moral behavior, and he showed all that heaven was accessible. Because of his extraordinary wisdom he earned the same praise which our predecessor, Boniface VIII, of Holy Memory, declared to have distinguished those most excellent doctors of the early church, who “enlightened the church through their salutary writings, embellished it with virtue, and shaped its moral life,” and whom Boniface described as “luminous and shining lights placed on a light-stand in the house of God, putting to flight the darkness of error, like a morning star lighting up the body of the entire church, unlocking the secrets of scripture, and with profound and beautiful sermons enlightening the edifice of the church as with verdant blossoms.” The extraordinary reputation of Francis de Sales and the singular excellence of the writings he has left us prove and demonstrate conclusively that this statement of Boniface VIII was applicable to the Bishop of Geneva during his life time and is especially applicable after his death.

The teaching of Francis was held in such high regard in his lifetime that our predecessor of Happy Memory, Clement VIII, chose him alone – the Bishop of Geneva – from among a large number of worthy defenders of Catholic truth who flourished at that time to approach Theodore Beza, the most zealous proponent of the Calvinist plague and to deal with him one-on-one so that once this sheep (de Bèze) had been returned to the fold of Christ, many others might be brought back as well. Francis accomplished this task so well - and not without danger to his life – that the heretic Bèze was deservedly reduced to silence and confessed the truth, although, because of his wickedness, in the hidden judgment of God, he was clearly unworthy to be returned to the bosom of the Church. Our holy Bishop enjoyed such great esteem in later years that Paul V, our predecessor of happy memory, when the famous dispute “*de Auxiliis*” was being argued in Rome, sought out the opinion of this holy Prelate and, having found himself in agreement with it, declared that this very subtle, very dangerous, long and bitterly disputed issue was settled and imposed silence on upon all parties to the debate. Indeed, if the letters he wrote to many different persons are taken into consideration, it becomes clear to all that Francis, like the most influential of the ancient Fathers of the Church, was often asked for advice by many about matters relating to explaining the Catholic faith, defending it, and to clearing up questions concerning it, and to conforming one’s life to a Christian way of living. It is also well known that, because of his learned and thorough study of many issues, Francis was held in such high esteem by Popes, monarchs, judges, and the priests who worked with him in his ministry that through his zeal, exhortations, and advice strategies were often developed by which entire regions were purged of the plague of heresy, Catholic worship was restored, and religion was enhanced.

This reputation for excellent teaching was not diminished after Francis’ death, but was in fact greatly increased. Distinguished individuals from every rank and the Popes themselves praised Francis’ extraordinary knowledge most lavishly. Indeed Pope Alexander VII, of holy memory, in the Bull of Canonization (May 19, 1665) declared Francis de Sales renowned for his teaching, admired for his sanctity and a remedy and bulwark for his times against heresy. He further asserted that the hearts of peoples and noble individuals nourished by Francis’ writings brought forth a rich harvest of evangelical life. And so, in the instruction which Alexander gave in the Consistory before the canonization, he concluded that de Sales had done great good for the Church by teaching all men through the word of his sound doctrine and by the example of his blameless life and that his influential role had survived to the present day “because of his counsels and evangelical teachings placed in the hands of the faithful through his books, which are read so assiduously.” These sentiments are similar to those expressed in a letter he sent to the Sisters of the Visitation Monastery in Annecy on July 27, 1666, in which he said that the virtue and wisdom of de Sales had permeated the entire Christian world and that he so admired Francis’ extraordinary merits and divinely inspired doctrine that he had chosen to follow him (Francis) “as the special leader and guide of (my) life.”

Our predecessor Clement IX, of holy memory, regarded Francis’ teaching to be of such value that, before he was Pope, he said that de Sales through his celebrated writings had fashioned a kind of holy arsenal for the benefit of souls and, after he became Pope, he approved this antiphon in Francis’ honor: “Our Lord filled Saint Francis with the Spirit of understanding, and Francis supplied an abundance of teaching for God’s people.” Benedict XIV, of holy memory, in agreement with his predecessors, hastened to affirm that the works of the Genevan Prelate had

been written with a divinely acquired knowledge. Relying on the authority of Francis, he resolved many difficult questions and called Francis "the wisest guide of souls" (Const. *Pastoralis Curae*, 28 July 1741). And so it is not surprising that many persons eminent both for their brilliance and their teaching, academicians, superb speakers, judges, distinguished theologians, and even princes and monarchs themselves have to this day proclaimed Francis to be a great and most learned man; and that many have followed Francis as their teacher and guide and have drawn much in their own writings from his.

This universally held opinion of the excellence of De Sales' wisdom arises from the quality of his teaching which, because of his holiness, so exceeds the norm that it is judged to be fitting for a Doctor of the Church and impels us to acknowledge that this man should be counted among the most distinguished teachers Christ our Lord has given to his spouse, the Church. Although it was their very antiquity which made the holy Doctors who flourished in the earliest days of the church worthy of serious consideration as well as the embellishment of the Latin and Greek languages in which they published their books, both these things very important and indeed necessary (as we have already indicated) to their teaching so that it would appear to be communicated in an extraordinary way, of heavenly inspiration, and invested with an abundance of varied arguments as if with brilliant jewels, so that it might penetrate the entire body of the church with a new light and be a source of salvation for the faithful. These laudatory pronouncements are especially fitting for the writings of the Bishop of Geneva. For whether one considers his writings on ascetical matters for the pious and holy conduct of Christian life, those which defended the faith, those which refuted heretics, or those having to do with the preaching of the divine word, everyone sees what great benefits flowed to the Catholic people through this holiest of men. With learning, subtlety and clarity he composed the outstanding and incomparable twelve-book *Treatise on the Love of God*, a work which has as many admirers of the author's gentleness as it has readers. In another work called *Philothea*, he described virtue in vivid colors. Making the crooked paths straight and rough ways smooth, he showed all Christians that the path to virtue was so easy that thereafter 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 villages of herdsmen. Indeed through his writings, he draws out from sacred doctrine the loftiest principles of the charism of sanctity and explains it so clearly that it seems to be his special gift to know how wisely and gently to apply this charism to all the conditions of the faithful. In addition, we have the tracts in which he teaches about devotion and piety, especially the Constitutions which he wrote for the Sisters of the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary founded by him. These are notable for their wisdom, discernment, and gentleness. The letters he wrote to many different persons provide a very fertile field for the teaching of spirituality. What is especially admirable is that in these letters Francis, filled with the Spirit of God and like the author of gentleness himself, sowed the seeds of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. We regard this devotion with the greatest spiritual joy because, spread far and wide in these difficult times of ours, it has miraculously brought about a large growth in piety. Nor should we overlook that, in Francis' studies and especially in his interpretation of the Cantic of Canticles, many scriptural mysteries concerning moral and spiritual questions were solved; many problems were explained, and many obscure points were exposed to new light. From this it is fair to conclude that God, with an abundance of heavenly grace, enlightened the understanding of this holy man so that he might interpret the scriptures and make them understandable for both the learned and the unlearned.

To weaken the obstinacy of the heretics of his day and to strengthen Catholics in their faith, he also wrote, no less fortuitously, his book of *Controversies* containing a complete description of the Catholic faith as well as other treatises and discourses on the truths of the faith, including *L'Étendard de la sainte croix* (The Standard of the Holy Cross). In these works he fought so vigorously on behalf of the Church that he returned countless number of souls to the Church's bosom and restored the faith far and wide throughout the entire region of the Chablais.

It is of special importance that he defended the authority of this Holy See and of our successor the Roman Pontiff Blessed Peter and explained the power and nature of the papacy itself with such clarity that he actually anticipated the decrees of the Vatican Ecumenical Council [Vatican I]. Certainly his ideas concerning the infallibility of the Roman Pontiff contained in the fortieth discourse of his *Controversies*, an original copy of which was discovered while this matter was being treated in the Council, are of such a nature that they led, as if by the hand a number of Council Fathers who were uncertain about infallibility up to that point to ultimately issue the decree regarding it. The approach which he used in preaching the divine word arose from the holy Prelate's great love for the church and his zeal for defending it. This was true whether his purpose in preaching was to educate the Christian faithful in the fundamentals of the faith, to shape the thinking of the more learned, or to lead all the faithful to the peak of perfection. Recognizing his obligation to both the wise and the unwise and, having made himself the servant of all, he took care to teach the rustic and uneducated with simple language, while, when dealing with the more sophisticated, he dispensed wisdom in more sophisticated terms. Through his teaching he handed down the most insightful maxims and was successful in restoring the dignity of sacred eloquence damaged by the evil of the times to the ancient splendor exemplified by the Holy Fathers; learned speakers emerged from this school and abundant benefits redounded to the entire church because of them. And so Francis is regarded by all as both restorer and teacher of sacred eloquence.

And, lastly, his divinely inspired teaching, like a river of living water refreshing the field of the Church, was so useful in obtaining salvation for the people of God that the seemingly prophetic words of the proverb, which our predecessor Clement VIII, of holy memory, said to de Sales when he was being elevated to the episcopacy, appear to be very true indeed: "Go, my son, and drink the water from your cistern and the rivers of your well; let your fountains flow far abroad, and distribute your waters in the streets." Joyfully drawing on these salutary waters, the faithful have greatly admired the eminent knowledge of the Bishop of Geneva and to the present day deemed him worthy of the role of teacher of the Church. Moved by these considerations, many Fathers of the Vatican Council have asked us with earnest pleadings and unanimous voice to honor Saint Francis de Sales with the title of Doctor. The Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church and many Archbishops worldwide have repeated this same wish. Many groups of Canons, Doctors of the Academy of the Lycaeans, distinguished civic leaders, leading nobles, and, finally a large number of faithful have come to us with their own similar requests.

Consequently, very willing to comply with so many and such great entreaties, we referred this important matter for further examination, as is customary, to the Congregation of our venerable brothers the Roman Cardinals of the Holy Church charged with preserving our sacred traditions for further examination. The aforesaid Congregation of our venerable brothers in a regular meeting held on July 7 of the current year at our Vatican office, after they had heard the report of

our venerable brother Cardinal Aloysius Bilio, the Bishop of the Sabine region, at the time the Prefect of this same Sacred Congregation as well as Positor of the cause, and after having carefully considered the observations of Laurentius Salvatus, Promoter of the holy faith, and the responses of the Promoter of the cause as well, and following a most thorough examination, decreed by unanimous consent that the following reply should be given: “We advise your Holiness to approve, declare and extend to the entire Church the title of Doctor in honor of Saint Francis de Sales together with the Office and Mass of the common of Doctors with a proper oration and readings of the second nocturn.” We approved this rescript by publishing a general decree "*Urbis et Orbis*" on July 19 of the same year. [click here to read](#) New requests were made that some addition be made both in the Roman Martyrology and in the sixth lesson on the feast of Saint Francis de Sales and that all the directives given in this matter be confirmed in our apostolic letters in the form of a decree. The Congregation of our venerable brothers, the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, in a regular meeting held on the fifteenth of September of the same year handed down a rescript that “the Holy Father should be requested to issue the decree.” They also decreed that there should be added to the statement about Francis in the Roman Martyrology after the words "*Annesium translatum fuit*" these words: “whom Pius IX in consultation with the Congregation of Sacred Rites has declared a Doctor of the Universal Church,” and that in the sixth lesson after the words "*Vigesima nona Januarii*" the following should be added: "and he was declared a Doctor of the Universal Church by his Holiness Pius IX in consultation with the Congregation of Sacred Rites." We ratified this rescript from the distinguished Congregation on the twentieth day of the same month and year, and we ordered that Apostolic Letters be published concerning all the actions taken in this matter. This being the case, in keeping with the wishes of the aforesaid Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, Archbishops, Canons, academicians and the faithful, and in consultation with the distinguished Congregation of our venerable brothers Cardinals of the Holy Roman Catholic Church charged with regulating the Sacred Rites, by our apostolic authority, and through this document, we approve the title of Doctor to honor Saint Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva and Founder of the Institute of the Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary, and, to the extent necessary, again grant and order that he shall forever hold the title of Doctor in the Universal Catholic Church and that on his annual feast day clerics secular and regular shall celebrate the Office and the Mass according to the aforementioned decree of the Congregation of Sacred Rites. Moreover we order that the books, commentaries, and all the works of this Doctor of the Church, be cited, introduced, and used both privately and publicly in schools, academies, colleges, lectures, disputations, interpretations, assemblies, other ecclesiastical studies, and all Christian activities as the case requires. To add incentives to the pious of the faithful in reverencing the feast day of this Doctor of the Church and imploring his help, relying upon the mercy of the omnipotent God and the authority of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul, we grant to all and every Christian of both sexes who on the feast of this holy Doctor or on one of the seven consecutive days immediately following, the choice being left to the discretion of each individual Christian, having repented, and confessed their sins, received the Holy Eucharist, and visited one of the churches of the order of the Sisters of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary with devotion and there prayed for peace among Christian Princes, the eradication of heresies, the conversion of sinners, and the exaltation of Holy Mother Church, a plenary indulgence and remission of all their sins mercifully in the Lord.

Wherefore, by this document, we direct all of our venerable brother Patriarchs, Primate, Archbishops, Bishops, and beloved sons and Prelates of other churches established throughout the world to see to it that the directives given above be solemnly published in their provinces, states, churches, and dioceses, and that they be without exception and forever observed by all both secular, ecclesiastics and religious of whatever order in every nation and place. We order and direct this -- any apostolic, ecumenical, provincial, synodal, general or special constitutions and decrees and any other directives to the contrary notwithstanding. We wish that the copies or prints taken from this original be signed by a notary public and sanctioned by the seal of the person in our ecclesiastical hierarchy charged with this responsibility so that the same authority will be attached to them as would be attached to this original if it were shown or exhibited.

Given in Rome at Saint Peter's under the seal-ring of the Fisherman on the sixteenth day of November 1877 in the thirty-second year of our Pontificate.

F. Card. Asquinius
