

# St. Francis de Sales

BORN 1567; DIED 1622  
BISHOP AND DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH  
FEAST DAY: JANUARY 24

**T**HE SECOND-MOST SIGNIFICANT FIGURE of the Protestant revolt against the Catholic Church was John Calvin, who taught a stern faith, denied free will, and preached that no matter what one did, God had predestined one to Heaven or Hell. In 1530, Protestants wrested the city of Geneva, on the southwestern tip of the Lake of Geneva, from the French Duchy of Savoy and made it an independent republic (it joined Switzerland in 1815). By 1552, Calvin had made Geneva and the surrounding area into a repressive theocracy. St. Francis de Sales was God's instrument to re-introduce the love of God and the Catholic faith to this area, and to teach a path of holiness to ordinary men and women everywhere.

Born two months prematurely at the family castle just outside Annecy, a city south of Geneva in Savoy, Francis was the oldest of six sons and seven daughters of Francis de Sales de Boissey and Frances de Sionnaz, members of aristocratic families of the region. As a child, their oldest was frail but energetic, obedient and honest, and loved books and learning. From the age of eight, he studied locally under Jesuits, receiving a tonsure (cutting of the hair symbolic of religious life) at eleven. He viewed this as a sign of

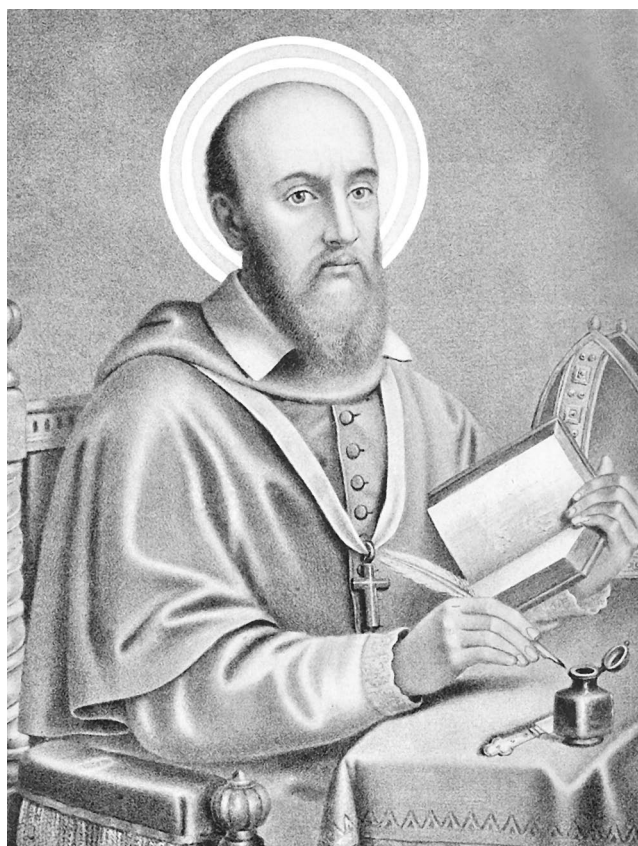
his future vocation, for he longed to devote himself to God as a priest. When he told his father of this desire, the senior Francis brushed it aside, wanting his son to pursue a secular career.

At sixteen, Francis went to the University of Paris, where he enrolled in a college under the Jesuits known for both scholarship and piety. There he studied rhetoric, philosophy, riding, dancing, and fencing to please his father, and

theology in pursuit of his vocation. During his four years there, he took a private vow of perpetual chastity and placed himself under the protection of the Blessed Mother. At eighteen he experienced the most terrible spiritual crisis of his life, nearly succumbing to despair that he had lost God's favor and was doomed to damnation. Desperately, he prayed that, even if he were damned, he would never curse or blaspheme God's name and would love God as

much as possible in this world. He also sought the intercession of the Blessed Mother, and his despair left him while he was praying the *Memorare* (a prayer that includes the phrase "never was it known that any who fled to your protection, implored your help and sought your intercession, was left unaided").

At twenty-one, Francis went to Padua, Italy, and at twenty-four he received doctorates in civil and canon law. For about a year and a half,



*St. Francis de Sales, 19th century lithograph*



he lived the life of young noble at home. He refused the offer of a political office in Savoy and his father's plan for his marriage, for he still intended to serve God alone. A cousin who was a priest, Louis de Sales, without Francis' knowledge arranged for the Pope to appoint Francis provost of the diocese of Geneva, the highest office next to the bishop. (In 1535, the seat of the diocese had been relocated to Annecy.) Hoping that this would sway his father to allow his ordination, Francis accepted the position. Six months later, his father gave in and he was ordained at age twenty-six. His task as his special duty was the care of the poor and the ministry of the confessional.

The next year, Francis volunteered for a mission to Le Chablais, the area immediately south of the Lake of Geneva. This area had experienced outright warfare several times in the past sixty years between Calvinists and the House of Savoy. It had become nearly entirely Calvinist and was very dangerous to Catholics; only about twenty individuals in the entire region had kept the true faith. Francis' father passionately but fruitlessly opposed the mission, arguing that he had given enough to allow his son to

be priest without him becoming a martyr. Calvinists and nature both conspired against him, to no effect. He survived, sometimes miraculously, an attempt to poison him, beating by a hostile crowd, and several efforts by assassins to murder him. Once he was treed by a wolf all night. He was rescued and saved from death by Calvinist peasants, whom he then converted to Catholicism.

When his work was not at first successful, Francis began writing leaflets on the true teaching of the Church and the errors of Calvinism. He and others copied them by hand and distributed them widely. In every way he sought

to reach people, whether by pamphlets, preaching in a simple style, or theological debates. He spoke as a father desiring only the welfare of his spiritual children. In the final two years of his mission, he won most of the residents of the region, eight thousand, back to the Church. Eventually the leaflets were assembled into a book entitled *Controversies* that demonstrates how the faith can be defended with gentle love.

At thirty-two, Francis was named coadjutor (auxiliary bishop with right of succession) of Geneva, and three years later he succeeded to the position. His twenty years as bishop were marked by his tireless emphasis on catechesis of the faithful, care of his priests, establishment of a seminary, reform of the diocese's communities of monks and nuns, and constant work of restoring Calvinists to the true faith. He taught a Catholic humanism of hope, and poured upon his flock a gentle, fatherly love. To those he sought to return to the Catholic faith, he showed tremendous compassion and clemency: "God and I will help you; all I require of you is not to despair: I shall take on myself the burden of the rest." He preached continually and became a confessor beloved for his

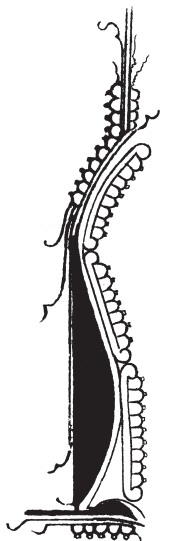
mercy and gentleness. Children followed him everywhere. He intensely loved the poor; living simply and very economically, he gave his own surplus to the poor. Word of his unselfish goodness, patience, mildness, wisdom, learning, and humility spread widely throughout Europe, and he attained a prominent place in the Catholic Counter-Reformation. He was twice asked to take the bishopric of Paris, and twice asked to take the bishopric of the diocese of Milan, Italy. He declined these and also the Pope's offer to name him a cardinal.

Francis engaged in an enormous correspondence of spiritual direction. In 1608, he pub-



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

*"He taught a Catholic humanism of hope."*





lished the spiritual masterpiece *Introduction to the Devout Life*, derived from letters to a woman cousin by marriage, only because the Jesuits threatened to do it without his permission (it became so popular that unauthorized versions, some with heretical additions and deletions, have been published). In 1616, some of his converts published, from his teaching, *Treatise on the Love of God*. Both books instruct men and women living in the world in the path to holiness.

In 1604, Francis met the widowed St. Jane Frances de Chantal while preaching at Dijon, France. Six years later, they co-founded the Congregation of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin as a religious order for girls and widows who were unable or did not wish to undertake the austere life of religious orders of the day. The original plan was for the Visitandines to carry out works of mercy in the world, not stay in a cloister, but this the Church did not permit and the Visitandines became a contemplative order. For these nuns, Francis wrote what was eventually published as *Spiritual Conferences*.

Teaching a spirituality characterized by balance and moderation, Francis was convinced that it was possible for everyone to become saints, and he became an unparalleled spiritual master in the pursuit of holiness by ordinary people living in the world, each in his or her own way depending on individual obligations and strength. He taught that a person must struggle against his or her own nature and unify his or her will with God, achieving the first by penance and the second by love. He taught that mortification of the senses was important but that unceasing mortification of the mind, the will, and the heart were more important. He also taught that the will of God is principally the present duties of a person's state in life. The path to holiness was therefore simple: remembering the presence of God, praying as children

of God, having a right intention in every action, and having frequent recourse to God throughout the day by simple, short prayers and ejaculations. He also saw contemplative prayer as even more necessary to a lay person than to a monk or nun, since the cloister encourages contemplation while the world tries to make it impossible. He gave little importance to mystical experiences, but taught that while praying, a person should be so absorbed in God as to forget he or she is praying.

Francis taught that mortification does not do violence to human nature and that goodness expands it. Holiness is not easily won; it is a miracle

of faith which, nevertheless, can be had by all regardless of their circumstances. He saw conversion as a gradual process, and taught people to be patient with them-

selves and to be cheerful even while engaged in spiritual struggle. He allowed people under his direction to retain some worldly pleasures until they voluntarily abandoned them, and thus gently led his spiritual children to love of God and self-sacrifice, encouraging them in the path of perseverance rather than achievement.

The meek and gentle Francis burned with the divine fire of the Holy Spirit. Profoundly in love with God, he ardently wooed his flock to the same love. Education, power, and fame meant nothing to him; his motto as bishop was "all that is not eternal is not worthy of a thought." He lived St. Paul's admonition: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:1-3). He himself wrote, in *Treatise on the Love of God*, "The measure of love is to love without measure."

*"The measure of love  
is to love without  
measure."*

