

Spreading the name and work of Francis de Sales during the 1600s through the 1800s

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Let us have a very pure intention in seeking, in all things, the honor and glory of God
– Francis de Sales –

First steps to make Francis de Sales known

Francis de Sales, Bishop and Prince of Geneva, had always involved himself in many projects for the evangelization and spiritual growth of the people of his diocese – and of people young and old wherever he went. After his sudden death on 28 December 1622, Mother Jane de Chantal understood the importance of ordering his effects. First of all, she had to do so in order to continue the organization of the very young order of the Visitation that he had founded only twelve years earlier, and of which she was the first Superior. Jane de Chantal also knew how extraordinary Francis de Sales was, and how much could still be learned from his teaching and from the example of his holy life. She explored the possibility of proposing him for beatification; she also thought of the benefit that many people would encounter if they could study his thought and his writings.

Early in 1623, Mother de Chantal took charge of collecting his personal papers, memoranda, letters, sermons, and works in progress. These were to be classified and stored in a specialized archive at the Visitation monastery in Annecy. She involved the sisters in preparing these materials. A vital part of this project was to see to the writing of a life of Francis de Sales. Mother de Chantal had a hand in the publishing of the earliest biographies of the late Bishop of Geneva.

The first biography of Francis de Sales appeared in print 18 months after his death. It was the work of Jean Goulu (Dom Jean de Saint François), superior general of the Feuillants, a reformed branch of the Cistercians, and a close collaborator with Francis de Sales for the reform of religious and priestly life in Savoy.

Fr. Goulu's book appeared first in Paris in June 1624 under the title: *La vie du bien-heureux Messire François de Sales, Evêque et Prince de Genève*. Mother de Chantal spoke about this as the first biography. It followed the established genre (called the "Vita"), halfway between hagiography and biography. Like any "Vita," Goulu's life of Francis de Sales had a devotional rather than an historical purpose. There was a major difference, however: Goulu's life of Francis de Sales was completely free of legendary accounts – something that easily crept into such works in the seventeenth century.

That same year (1624) a second life of Francis de Sales appeared in print in Lyons. This was the work of a friar of the Order of Minims by the name of Louis de la Rivière. Fr. de la Rivière had preached the Lenten exercises in Annecy in 1616, during which time he had long conversations with Francis de Sales, whom he admired more and more as a result. After he learned of Francis's death, Father de la Rivière returned to Annecy. His purpose was to gather data about the saintly bishop. He dedicated a lot of time to visiting people of all stripes, clergy and laity, and interviewed them at length. Not only did he record those conversations, he also studied whatever documents were made available to him and took extensive notes regarding all that he saw and heard during his time in the diocese. Fr. de la Rivière took his notes with him to his friary in Lyons. After a year of diligent work, he published *La Vie de l'Ill.me et Rev.me François de Sales* (Lyon: Riguard, 1624). This was the first true biography of Francis de Sales.

In preparing the *Vie*, Fr. de la Rivière began to collect copies of the prelate's writings. Antoine Favre, a long-time intimate friend of Francis de Sales, helped identify a number of fragments, especially certain ascetical documents, were published in appendix. All during the time that he made his interviews and collected materials, Fr. de la Rivière worked in close contact with Mother de Chantal and with Francis's own brothers Jean-François and Louis, as well with a number of others had been close collaborators of the late bishop.

This biography went through five printing runs during the first three year. The author revised and enlarged the book for a new edition in 1631. The book was reprinted in the nineteenth century, in 1825

and 1827, and seems to have been well known in ecclesiastical quarters. Its seventeenth-century language is quaint but fresh, and Louis de la Rivière seems to penetrate the mind and heart of Francis de Sales, making his book an interesting resource.

In the next few years two other biographical works of Francis de Sales appeared that promoted his reputation in Savoy, France and Rome. The first was the work of Francis's own nephew, Charles-Auguste de Sales, then a priest of the diocese of Geneva and later bishop. Charles-Auguste worked as postulator general for his uncle's cause of beatification. When it became clear to him that the process was stalled in Rome, he decided to interview everyone who knew the late bishop and to gather whatever documentation he could find that was somehow related to his uncle's life and ministry. He gathered correspondence, notebooks, sermons, and even diocesan directives. Then he set out to tell his uncle's story. In so doing, Charles-Auguste produced a unique biography based on intimate recollections and official documentation.

Mother de Chantal painstakingly reviewed the final manuscript and stated that, in her opinion, Charles-Auguste had produced the best biography to date of Francis de Sales. With her encouragement, the young priest published a Latin version of the work in 1634, and a French edition soon afterwards. For his part, Charles-Auguste relied on Mother de Chantal and members of the de Sales family as his main oral sources. Later scholars would find difficulty with the storyline, yet the picture that Charles-Auguste presents of his uncle is intimate and familial. It is Francis de Sales as he was known by those who knew and loved him best.

Three years later a much more influential volume would appear – the work of a Jesuit preacher by the name of Nicolas Caussin. Caussin did not write a biography, but presented Francis de Sales as a model of pastoral zeal and reform in *Traicté de la conduite spirituelle selon l'esprit de S. François de Sales* (Douay: Jean Serrurier, 1637). Caussin published a number of books, and in this work he was less interested in writing a biography than in presenting Francis de Sales as a model pastor. *Traicté de la conduite spirituelle* reached a wide audience, thanks to Caussin's connections within the Jesuit network and his good reputation at the court of Louis XIII. In this way, Francis de Sales became known throughout the Church in France, and was seen as offering a pattern for bishops and pastors who seriously sought to implement the reforms of the Council of Trent, and lead Catholics to a deeper level of commitment to the Gospel at the start of the modern era.

The last writer of the era to attempt a *Vita* of Francis de Sales was Jean-Pierre Camus who, it is interesting to note, considered himself a disciple of the Bishop of Geneva. Camus was bishop of the neighboring diocese of Belley, and lived in close contact with Francis with whom he entered into intimate dialogue, consulting the elder bishop on every matter of importance. Between 1639 and 1641 he published an exposé of the holy bishop's teachings, both formal and informal, in a six-volume work entitled *L'esprit du Bienheureux François de Sales*. Camus' presentation of Francis de Sales is not a biography, but a moral profile of the man he regarded as his own pastoral mentor and a spiritual giant. Here is the shepherd of souls who lived the Gospel to a heroic degree; Camus invites his readers to know and live this same spirit of Christian virtue.

Popularity of Francis de Sales in Italy

Pier-Giacinto Gallizia published the first Italian-language life of Francis de Sales in 1720: *Vita di S. Francesco di Sales, Vescovo e principe di Ginevra, e Fondatore dell'Ordine della Visitazione*. Gallizia was a priest of the archdiocese of Torino and a chaplain for the Visitation Sisters. He realized that very few of the sisters understood French, so he wrote rather than translated a life of the sainted founder of their order. The work presented the life and mission of Francis de Sales (books 1-4), concluded with an account of the founding of the Visitation (book 5) and a collection of maxims from the saint's teachings (book 6). These features would make Gallizia's *Vita di S. Francesco di Sales* popular not only in Torino, but throughout Italy.

Not long after Gallizia had published, a devoted group in Torino formed an Association of St Francis de Sales. In fact, many people in Torino considered him to be one of their own special saints. The memory of his visits to the city and his effective preaching in the city's churches, as well as the example of his virtues and assistance of the poor, prompted them to choose St. Francis de Sales as the co-patron saint of the city and the archdiocese. The purpose of the Association, established in 1720, was to invoke him a protector and guide on the path of virtue. They would do this with daily prayers and by celebrating a special feast each year on 28 December, the anniversary of his *transitus*. At

regular meetings they would discuss the writings and teachings of the saint, whose works they would systematically read in the period between meetings. In this way the associates would form one another in the spirit of Francis de Sales. In terms of membership, the Association would be made up of three groups of 56 associates: 56 priests, 56 laymen and 56 laywomen (56, since Francis had lived for 56 years). There is evidence that the Association of St Francis de Sales in Torino remained operative at least to the end of the nineteenth century.

During the eighteenth century similar groups came into existence – apostolic associations that looked to Francis de Sales for inspiration in dealing with difficulty situations in particular churches. These would survive the Revolution and blossom during the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth-century Catholicism and Francis de Sales

As the eighteenth century ended, many were convinced – starting with the French – that the papacy and the Church were things of the past. Instead, the twentieth century dawned with a renewed Catholic Church, and the pope's role stronger and more clearly defined than ever. The figure of Francis de Sales played no small part in the transformation.

From the beginning of the Restoration, Francis de Sales was presented alongside Charles Borromeo as the model for a new apostolic-spirited priesthood. These were the two bishop-saints known for their exceptional efforts to implement the reforms of the Council of Trent, but in the wake of the dissolution of the Napoleonic Empire, the Church in Europe re-presented them as models for an intensely apostolic life.

Many parish associations and new religious communities took their inspiration from Francis de Sales in Italy, France and Belgium in the early years of the Restoration. As the nineteenth century moved into a period of grave contrasts between Church and State in much of Western Europe, the gentle but firm wisdom of Francis de Sales became even more popular.

A most significant Association came into being in mid-century – a movement, as it were, for what Pius IX spoke of as the Propagation of the Faith at Home. The founder and formulator of the project was Msgr. Gaston de Ségur who, at the behest of many of the most apostolic men of France and Italy, founded an association that he called the *Work (Œuvre) of Francis de Sales for the Defense and Conservation of the Faith*. The association took shape in 1857, and quickly spread into the majority of dioceses in France, Belgium and Italy. Although there was no centralized authority, the movement looked to Paris, or rather, to the person of Msgr. de Ségur for inspiration and encouragement. De Ségur, in turn, offered Francis de Sales, the apostle of charity, as a model for preserving and growing the faith during the anti-clerical upheavals of the period.

The association's mission was the very work (*œuvre*) that made Francis de Sales famous: the defense and preservation of the Catholic faith, especially within environments that had become hostile to the Church. There were many programs designed to further this mission, but all were based on pressing needs that surfaced in local environments. Some of the most representative initiatives included the renewal of preaching, the spread of the Catholic publications, the formation of seminarians and laity, the financing of Catholic schools and the organization of regional and national Eucharistic congresses. Within two decades of its founding, the international *Work of Francis de Sales* had grown to just under two million members.

New wave of Salesian enthusiasts

Louis de Ségur had contact with many of the leading church figures of day. He was very well acquainted the noted Dominican preacher at Notre Dame, Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, the apologist Théodore Ratisbonne and the Jesuit preachers and authors Gustave de Ravignan, Pierre Olivaint and Armand de Ponlevoy. These churchmen were among those who consulted with Msgr. de Ségur on the importance of presenting Catholic teaching in new ways among their anti-clerical contemporaries. For de Ségur, there was no better model than Francis de Sales if the church were to make a new approach to their estranged contemporaries.

Attachment to Francis de Sales attracted other leading Catholic figures. Msgr. de Ségur communicated with the Visitation Sisters in France and Switzerland, beginning with the Superior of Troyes, Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, and through her with the founders of the Oblates of St Francis de Sales – Louis Brisson and Leonie Aviat. He befriended Fr. Henri Chaumont, founder with Madame Caroline Carré de Malberg of the Daughters of Francis de Sales. On several occasions Msgr. de Ségur met with Emmanuel d'Alzon (priest, educator and

founder of the Assumptionists), Gaspard Mermillod (auxiliary bishop of Lausanne-Geneva), and Jean-Marie Tissot (member of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales and Vicar Apostolic of Visakhapatnam, India).

Torino connections

Through his Salesian connections, Msgr. de Ségur also came to know Don Bosco. Of course, we all are quite familiar with Don Bosco's Salesian connections in Torino. Apostolic leaders among the laity (Tancredi and Juliette Falletti di Barolo, Silvio Pellico) looked to Salesian teaching in addressing the urgent social and religious issues of the day. In addition, a long line of intensely apostolic priests and religious shared a Salesian spirit: Giuseppe Cafasso, Carlo Cavina, Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, Giuseppe Marelli, Anna Michelotti, Lucia Noiret and Guido Conforti.

For Don Bosco, the *work (opera)* of Francis de Sales centered on catechesis and took shape in the Festive Oratory, first of all, and in schools and workshops. The work would be populated by committed laity and priests, and be come known as Salesian *Co-Operation*.

Don Bosco took his motto *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, he claimed, from St Francis de Sales. These words signaled the purpose and way of life that he had promoted at his Oratory in Valdocco from his earliest years in ministry. Don Bosco recognized in Francis de Sales the apostolic priest whose gentle kindness and pastoral charity became effective virtues for serving God and saving souls.

Francis de Sales's *Da mihi animas* became, for Don Bosco, a prayer that represented a life-long investment. Don Bosco had learned this from his spiritual director, Don Cafasso. For the Church that was trying to win back many who had strayed, Francis de Sales exemplified the tireless shepherd of souls, who went in search of the sheep. The salvation of souls must be the only concern of the apostolic priest, Don Cafasso asserted: "*Give me souls, O Lord*, let us say with that great apostle of charity S. Francis de Sales [...] Let us apply our efforts to increase the population of paradise, and to block sins from gaining ground on earth."

Don Bosco also learned it from his students – boys like Dominic Savio who understood the significance of the phrase. "I think I get it," Dominic said, looking up at the poster behind Don Bosco's desk on the very day that he first arrived at the Oratory. "Here you do not do business with money, but you do business with souls. I get it now, and I hope that my soul will figure into your trade and commerce."

Conclusion

Wendy M. Wright speaks of the nineteenth century as the period of the Salesian Pentecost. For those seeking to renew the Church during that troubled period, Francis de Sales represented the apostle of the faith and the doctor of charity.

Don Bosco was one of many who admired the saintly bishop of Geneva, and while it may not be true that he *identified* with this saint, says Pietro Stella, we do note that he chose him as the model of his priesthood and pastoral work. Can we speak of an *affinity* between the two?