

LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
ON THE FOURTH CENTENARY
OF THE EPISCOPAL ORDINATION
OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES

To Bishop Yves Boivineau of Annecy

1. On 8 December, you will observe the fourth centenary of the episcopal ordination of your predecessor, St Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva and Doctor of the Church, "one of the greatest figures of the Church and of history" (Paul VI, *Angelus*, 29 January 1967). Consecrated "Prince Bishop of Geneva" on 8 December 1602, King Henry IV honoured him with the title "the phoenix of Bishops", because, he said, "he is a rare bird on this earth". After renouncing the pomp of Paris and the king's endeavour to give him a famous episcopal see, he became the tireless pastor and evangelizer of his native land, Savoy, which he loved above all. He explained, "I am a 'Savoyard' in every way, by birth and by obligation". Guided by the Fathers of the Church, he found in prayer and in deeply meditated knowledge of Scripture the strength he needed to accomplish his mission and lead the people to God.

Like my Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, who wrote the Letter *Sabaudiae gemma* on the occasion of the fourth centenary of his birth (29 January 1967), I pray God to make flourish and shine forth in the Church a striking spiritual life through the teaching of the holy Bishop of Geneva who remains a source of light for our contemporaries as he was in his time.

Adviser of popes and princes, endowed with great spiritual, pastoral and diplomatic qualities, Francis de Sales was a man of unity in a period when divisions created a wound in the Church's side. He especially took care to re-establish the unity of his diocese and maintain the communion of faith, founding his approach on confidence in God, the charity that can do all things, an ascetical lifestyle and prayer, as he underlined in a truly programmatic address after his ordination to the priesthood, for this is how one must live Christian discipline and behave as God's true children (cf. *Harangue pour la prévôté: Oeuvres complètes*, édition d'Annecy, VII, p. 99, ff.). Later, he explained the true meaning of theological charity: "Charity is a love of friendship, a friendship of preference, a preferential love, but an incomparable preference, sovereign and supernatural, that is as a sun in the soul to enlighten it with its rays, in all the spiritual faculties to perfect them, in all one's powers to moderate them, but in the will, as on its seat, to dwell there and to make it cherish and love its God above all things" (cf. *Treatise of the Love of God*, Book II, chap. 22, p. 125, translated by H.B. Mackey, Newman Book Shop, Westminster, Md., 1945).

2. Taking as his model St Charles Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, he concentrated on spreading the teaching of the Council of Trent faithfully and creatively and on putting into practice its pastoral dispositions. He reorganized his diocese, which he visited twice in its entirety, suffering deeply from seeing the painful situation of Geneva, his episcopal see, which had gone over to the Calvinist Reform.

He took care of the formation of his priests, by having monthly conferences for them, so that he could give to the sheep without shepherds, merciful pastors capable of teaching the Christian mystery and of celebrating ever more worthily the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation.

He was particularly concerned to help his clergy and faithful discover that penance is a moment of encounter with the love of Our Lord, who welcomes all who come to him humbly asking forgiveness. He also took care to reform the monastic orders, as he wrote to Pope Paul V in November 1606 (*Oeuvres complètes*, XXIII, p. 325).

3. Doctor of divine love, Francis de Sales did not rest until the faithful accepted God's love, to live fully in it, turning their hearts to God and uniting themselves with him (cf. *Traité de l'amour de Dieu: Oeuvres complètes*, IV, p. 40 ff.). This is how, under his direction, many Christians walked on the path of holiness; he showed them that all are called to live an intense spiritual life, whatever their situation and profession, for "the Church is a garden filled with infinite flowers where there are flowers of different sizes, colours, fragrances: in brief, of different perfections. For they each have their price, their grace, and their substance, and make a most pleasing perfection of beauty in the gathering of of their rich variety" (*Traité de l'amour de Dieu: Oeuvres complètes*, IV, p. 111).

A man of great goodness and kindness, who knew how to express God's mercy and patience to those who came to speak with him, he taught an exacting but serene spirituality based on love, for loving God "is the sovereign happiness of the soul for this life and for eternity" (*Letter to Mother Marie-Jacqueline Favre*, 10 March 1612: *Oeuvres complètes*, XV, p. 180). With great simplicity he formed each person in contemplative prayer: "You must prostrate yourself before God and remain there at his feet: he will certainly understand by this humble attitude that you are his and that you want his help even before you can speak about it" (*Letter to Jeanne Françoise Frémyot de Chantal*, 14 October 1604: *Oeuvres complètes*, XII, p. 325). He was concerned to lead souls to the heights of perfection, in his concern to unify the person around the heart of existence: a life of intimacy with the Lord, through which the human being can receive perfection and become better (cf. *Traité de l'amour de Dieu: Oeuvres complètes* IV, p. 49). He was desirous of enabling each person to return to Christ and to set out anew from Christ to lead a good life, for God has given each one the government of his faculties, which he must rightly place under the direction of the will (cf. *Traité de l'amour de Dieu: Oeuvres complètes* IV, pp. 23-24).

As St Jeanne de Chantal did, may we be able to listen to his exhortations to be faithful to meditation on the Life and Death of Christ: they are the gate of Heaven. In meditating on them often, we gradually learn the treasures they contain. The soul must remain in the contemplation of the Cross and meditation on the Passion (*L'étendard de la Sainte Croix: Oeuvres complètes*, II). Perfection consists in being conformed to the Son of God, in letting oneself be guided by the Holy Spirit, in perfect obedience (cf. *Traité de l'amour de Dieu: Oeuvres complètes* XI, 15, V, pp. 291 ff.). "Perfect abandonment into the hands of the heavenly Father and a perfect indifference as to what the divine will decides are the quintessence of the spiritual life... All the setbacks in our perfection come only from the lack of abandonment, and it is certainly true that it is right to begin, to continue and to

finish the spiritual life right there, in imitation of our Saviour who did this with an extraordinary perfection in the beginning, during and at the end of his life" (*Sermon pour le Vendredi Saint*, 1622: *Oeuvres complètes*, X, p. 389).

4. With a particularly voluminous correspondence, he also accompanied with great discernment and a gradual pedagogy adapted to each situation, appropriately using highly coloured images, the souls who entrusted themselves to his spiritual direction, so that each good act and each victory over sin might be as "many precious stones to be set into the crown of glory that God prepares for us in his Paradise" (*Introduction à la Vie dévote*, IV, 8: *Oeuvres complètes*, III, p. 307). Since he was passionately in love with God and man, his attitude to people was fundamentally optimistic and he never failed to invite them, to use his own words, to flourish where they were sown. Still today, and I am very glad of it, the works of Francis de Sales are part of our classical literature; it is the sign that his teaching as a priest and bishop finds an echo in the human heart and has an affinity with the deepest human aspirations. I invite pastors and faithful to learn from his example and his writings, which are always up to date.

On this occasion, how can we fail also to evoke St Jeanne de Chantal, with whom he founded the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, desiring, in an original and innovative way, to offer a form of religious life that was open to the greatest possible number of women who were ready to put contemplation first.

Giving thanks for the witness of the priestly and episcopal life of this Apostle of the Chablais, and for his written work, I ask the Lord to inspire in the contemporary world an ever greater number of men and women who know how to live Salesian spirituality and how to present it to our contemporaries, so that all may have a "watchful faith", which "not only performs good works, but goes into and subtly and swiftly understands revealed truths", in order to transmit them to the world (*Sermon pour le jeudi après le premier dimanche de Carême*, 1622: *Oeuvres complètes*, XI, p. 220).

5. Finally, my wish is the same as that of the Doctor of divine love: "May God alone be your repose and your consolation" (*Letter to Mademoiselle de Soulfour*, 16 January 1603: *Oeuvres complètes*, XII, p. 163).

As I entrust you to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Conception and St Francis de Sales, I cordially impart an affectionate apostolic Blessing to you. I very willingly impart it to the bishops of the region, to the priests and the faithful of Savoy, of Switzerland and of Piedmont, to the women religious of the Visitation of Holy Mary, to the members of the different Salesian institutes and to all who live Salesian spirituality, to journalists, writers and to everyone who works in the media, whose holy patron is St Francis de Sales, and to all who join in the celebration of this anniversary.

From the Vatican, 23 November 2002.

JOHN PAUL II