

June 1, 2011: Justin Martyr

If you “Google” Justin, martyr, it is interesting to note that in many cases the comma is removed and the term “martyr” is used as his last name. If this serves as recognition for his giving witness to (and his life for) the Gospel, such praise doesn’t come much higher than this!

The ORDO describes Justin as a “layman and apologist who gives one of the earliest descriptions of the Mass...” This was not unknown to St. Francis de Sales, who invoked Justin’s account of the Mass in his Catholic Controversies. In a tract entitled “On the Form of the Sacraments” dealing with the Eucharist itself, Francis observed:

“Justin Martyr, describing the ancient office which the Christians performed on Sundays, amongst other things says that after the general prayers they offered bread, wine and water; then the prelate made earnest prayers and thanksgivings [*eucharistias*] to God; the people gave thanks, saying Amen: ‘these things being consecrated, with the Eucharist, every one participates, and the same things are given to the Deacons, to be carried to the Absent.’ Several things are noticeable here: water was mingled with the wine, they offered, they consecrated, they carried it to the sick...”

I wonder if Justin Martyr ever gave any thought as to how his account of – and his witness to – the early Mass would effect the lives of others so long after his death?

What about us? How will our own attempts to give witness to the power of the Eucharist – that is, being/living thankfulness – impact others long after we’ve gone? Ever given any thought to it?

June 11, 2011: Barnabas, Apostle

Remembered as a companion and co-worker with Paul in preaching to the Gentiles, Barnabas was martyred on – and is honored as the patron of – the island of Cyprus, the place of his birth.

In his Treatise on the Love of God (*and in the process gives an account of some of liturgical practices in his day*), St. Francis wrote:

“The conformity of our heart with God’s signified will consists in the fact that we will all that God’s goodness signifies to us as his intention, so that we believe according to his teaching, hope according to his promises, fear according to his warnings and love and live according to his ordinances and admonitions... for this reason we remain standing while the Gospel lessons are read to show that we are ready to obey the holy signification of God’s will contained in the Gospel. For this reason we kiss the book at the place where the Gospel is to show that we adore the holy word that declares God’s will. For this reason in ancient days many men and women saints bore upon their breast the Gospel written out as a talisman of love, as is told of St. Cecilia. In fact, St. Matthew’s Gospel was found on St. Barnabas’ heart after his death written out in the saint’s own hand...” (TLG 8: 3)

How do our hearts conform to the will of God? How do we demonstrate our ready to obey and adore God’s will as proclaimed in the Gospel? Using the image employed by Francis de Sales himself, how does our obedience to the word and will of God transform our hearts into talismans of God’s love and life in the lives of others?

June 13, 2011: Anthony of Padua

In the movie *Field of Dreams* (1989), farm/field owner Ray Kinsella (played by Kevin Costner) has a conversation with Dr. Archibald “Moonlight” Graham (played by Burt Lancaster) about ‘what-might-have-been’s’ in life.

When Ray asks “Moonlight” (his baseball nickname) Graham if he ever had a wish, the latter responds: “Well, you know I... I never got to bat in the major leagues. I would have liked to have had that chance. Just once. To stare down a big league pitcher. To stare him down, and just as he goes into his windup, wink. Make him think you know something he doesn't. That's what I wish for. Chance to squint at a sky so blue that it hurts your eyes just to look at it. To feel the tingling in your arm as you connect with the ball. To run the bases - stretch a double into a triple, and flop face-first into third, wrap your arms around the bag. That's my wish, Ray Kinsella. That's my wish. And is there enough magic out there in the moonlight to make this dream come true?” When Ray tells Doc Graham that he thinks that – in fact – his dream can actually come true, Graham surprisingly responds in resignation: “Well, it'll have to stay a wish...” Incredulous, Kinsella shouts: “Fifty years ago, for five minutes you came within... y-you came this close. It would KILL some men to get so close to their dream and not touch it. God, they'd consider it a tragedy.” Paradoxically enough, the doctor responds: “Son, if I'd only gotten to be a doctor for five minutes... now that would have been a tragedy.” And he smiled.

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St. Anthony of Padua once had a dream, too.

Fernando Martins de Bulhões was born to a very rich family of the nobility who wanted him to become educated, and they arranged for him to be instructed at the local cathedral school. Against the wishes of his family, however, he entered the Augustinian Abbey of St. Vincent on the outskirts of Lisbon. After his ordination to the priesthood, Fernando was placed in charge of hospitality in his abbey. It was in this role, in 1219, that he came in contact with five Franciscans who were on their way to Morocco to preach to the Muslims there. Fernando was strongly attracted to the simple evangelical lifestyle of the Franciscan friars. In February 1220, news arrived that the five Franciscans had been martyred in Morocco. Fernando meditated on the heroism of these Franciscans, and, inspired by their example, he obtained permission from his Augustinian superiors to join the Franciscan Order.

On the return trip to Portugal, his ship was driven by storm upon the coast of Sicily and he barely made it to land at Messina. From Sicily he made his way to Assisi and sought admission into a monastery in Italy, but met with difficulty on account of his sickly appearance (having nearly been lost at sea). He was finally assigned, out of pure compassion, to the rural hospice of San Paolo, a choice made after considering his poor health. He appears to have lived as a hermit there and was put to work in the kitchen. It was here that he took the name Anthony.

One day, on the occasion of an ordination, a great many visiting Dominican friars were present, and there was some misunderstanding over who should preach. The Franciscans naturally expected that one of the Dominicans would occupy the pulpit, for they were renowned for their preaching; the Dominicans, on the other hand, had come unprepared, thinking that a Franciscan would be the homilist. In this quandary, the head of the hermitage called upon Anthony and entreated him to speak whatever the Holy Spirit should put into his mouth. Anthony objected but was overruled, and his sermon created a deep impression. Not only his rich voice and arresting manner, but the entire theme and substance of his discourse and his moving eloquence, held the attention of his hearers.

At that point, Anthony was commissioned by Brother Gratian, the minister provincial, to preach the Gospel throughout the area of Lombardy, in northern Italy. From then on his skills were used to the utmost by the Church. Occasionally he took another post, as a teacher, for instance, at the universities of Montpellier and Toulouse in southern France, but it was as a preacher that Anthony revealed his supreme gift. (*From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.*)

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In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“God often inspires us with most lofty plans but does not will that they succeed. Then, just as we must confidently, courageously and constantly begin and pursue the work as long as possible, so also we must humbly and calmly acquiesce in whatever outcome God is pleased to give to the enterprise. By inspiration, St. Louis went overseas to conquer the Holy Land; the outcome was contrary to his wish but he humbly accepted it: I rate more highly that tranquil acceptance than the nobility of soul behind the project. St. Francis went to Egypt either to convert the infidels or to die a martyr among the infidels: such was God’s will. He came back without having done either the one or the other: such, too, was God’s will. It was equally God’s will for St. Anthony of Padua to desire martyrdom and not to obtain it...” (TLG: 9, 6)

It’s very tempting sometimes to look over our shoulders at the “what-if’s” and/or the “what-might-have-been’s” in our lives. More than a few of us might have dreams that went unfulfilled; projects that were never completed; hopes that were never realized. Where does that leave us?

It’s important to consider that what we once dreamed we’d do in life might not be nearly as important as what God dreams we do in life. History (as is cinema, for that matter) is filled with countless stories of people whose names we might never have heard – and whose legacies we might never have celebrated – if “their” dreams (as distinct from God’s dreams) had come true. A would-be baseball player might never have become an invaluable physician; an erstwhile martyr might never have become a renowned preacher...the list goes on and on.

Bottom line? By all means, do follow your dreams...but follow them *wherever* God’s dreams may take them.

And you.

June 24, 2011: Nativity of John the Baptizer

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Nativity of John the Baptizer.

Francis de Sales once wrote: “I have often wondered who is the most mortified of the saints that I know, and after some reflection I have come to the conclusion that it was St. John the Baptist. He went into the desert when he was five years old, and knew that our Savior came to earth in a place quite close by, perhaps only one or two days’ journey. How his heart, touched with love of his Savior from the time he was in his mother’s womb, must have longed to enjoy Christ’s presence. Yet, he spends twenty-five years in the desert without coming to see our Lord even once; and leaving the desert he catechized without visiting him but waiting until our Lord comes to seek him out. Then, after he has baptized Jesus, he does not follow him but stays behind to do his appointed task. How truly mortified was John’s spirit! To be so near his Savior and not see him, to have Him so close and not enjoy His presence! Is this not a completely detached spirit, detached even from God himself so as to do God’s will, and to serve God, as it were to leave God for God, and not to cling to God in order to love him better? The example of this great saint overwhelms me with its grandeur.” (Stopp, Selected Letters, Page 74)

“How truly mortified was John the Baptist’s spirit.” What does Francis de Sales mean? The American Heritage Dictionary defines *mortify* as “to discipline by self-denial or self-inflicted privation.” John did, indeed, discipline himself: he denied himself many things in order to be faithful to his understanding of who God wanted him to be: a light to the nations, a light to highlight the coming of Jesus.

Think about it: from Francis de Sales’ perspective (based on the so-called ‘argument from silence,’ i.e., we have no evidence to the contrary) John spends nearly three decades in the desert preparing to announce Christ’s coming. Despite growing up in the same general area, John meets Christ once – when he baptized him at the Jordan River – only to remain behind as Jesus recruited others to physically accompany him as his apostles and

disciples! The ‘Messiah’s herald’ never sees his cousin again before dying alone in prison at the hands of one of King Herod’s executioners.

John was faithful to the role God wanted him to play in the plan of salvation: John played that role supremely well, even when he may not have understood the particulars of God’s plan. Listen to what Jesus himself said: “I tell you the truth: among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.” (Matthew 11: 11) “Yet,” Jesus continues, “anyone who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” John shows us that being faithful to God’s will often requires that we deprive ourselves of the desire to “have it all” and to dedicate ourselves to discerning – and accepting – our unique roles in God’s plan of salvation.

No less and no more.

June 29, 2011: Peter and Paul, Apostles

Of Saint Peter, Francis de Sales wrote: “St. Peter was chosen to be the chief of the Apostles, although he was subject to so many imperfections that he even committed some after he had received the Holy Spirit, because, notwithstanding these defects, he was always full of courage, never allowing himself to be dismayed by his shortcomings.” (Conferences, Number IV, Page 63)

Francis expounds upon this duality of Peter’s nature in his Treatise on the Love of God. “Who would not marvel at the heart of St. Peter, so bold among armed soldiers that out of all of his master’s company he alone takes his sword in hand and strikes out with it? Yet a little afterwards among ordinary people he is so cowardly that at the mere word of a servant girl he denies and detests his master.”(Book X, Chapter 9, p, 167)

Let’s leave some room for St. Paul, too, shall we? Francis observed: “He fights for all people, he pours forth prayers for all people, he is passionately jealous in behalf of all people, he is on fire for all people. Yes, he even dared more than this for ‘those according to the flesh,’ so that, if I dare to say so, he desires by charity that they may be put in his place with Jesus Christ. O perfection of courage and unbelievable spirit!” (Treatise, Book X, Chapter 16, pp. 188 – 189)

Of course, as in the case of Peter, Paul, too, has his shortcomings. In a letter of encouragement to a sister of the Visitation, Francis wrote: “Do not be ashamed...any more than St. Paul who confessed that there were two men in him, one rebellious to God and the other obedient to God.” (Stopp, Selected Letters, page 224.)

Indeed, their message – as we see as clearly in their lives as we hear in their words – continues to go out through all the earth. And this message could not be any clearer or more relevant now than it was nearly 200 years ago: “God chooses the weak and makes them strong in bearing witness...” (Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer: Martyrs)

God chooses the weak and makes them strong in bearing witness to the power and promise of his love. God chose Peter and Paul in their time to be heralds of the Good News.

God chooses us, likewise, in our time. The Lord chooses us as we are – imperfections, cracks, warts and all – and makes us something strong, beautiful, powerful and passionate, for God...and for one another.

July 1, 2011: Sacred Heart of Jesus

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Truly, God’s love is seated within the Savior’s heart as on a royal throne. He beholds through the cleft of His

pierced side all the hearts of His children. His heart is king of hearts and He keeps His eyes fixed on our hearts. Just as those who peer through a lattice see clearly while they themselves are only half seen, so, too, the divine love within that heart, or rather that heart of divine love, always clearly sees our hearts and looks on them with the eyes of love, while we do not see Him, but only half see Him. If we could see Him as He is, O God, since we are mortals we would die for love of Him, just as when He was in mortal flesh He died for us, and just as He would still die for us were He not now immortal. Oh, if we could hear this Divine Heart singing with a voice infinitely sweet His canticle for praise to the divinity! What joy, what striving within our hearts to spring up to heaven so as to hear it forever!" (Living Jesus, p. 342)

God always sees our hearts and looks on them – and us – with the eyes of love. How is that Sacred Heart of Jesus calling us today to look loving at ourselves and at one another?

July 4, 2011: Independence Day

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Our free will is never so free as when it is a slave to God’s will, just as it is never so servile as when it serves our own will. It never has so much life as when it dies to self, and never so much death as when it lives to itself. We have the liberty to do good and evil, but to choose evil is not to use but to abuse this liberty. Let us renounce such wretched liberty and subject forever our free will to the rule of heavenly love. Let us become slaves to dilection, whose serfs are happier than kings. If our souls should ever will to use their liberty against our resolutions to serve God eternally and without reserve, Oh, then, for love of God, let us sacrifice our free will and make it die to itself so that it may live in God! A man who out of self-love wishes to keep his freedom in this world shall lose it in the next world, and he who shall lose it in this world for the love of God shall keep it for that same love in the next world. He who keeps his liberty in this world shall find it a serf and a slave in the other world, whereas he who makes it serve the cross in this world shall have it free in the other world. For there, when he is absorbed in enjoyment of God’s goodness, his liberty will be converted into love and love into liberty, a liberty infinitely sweet. Without effort, without pain, and without any struggle we shall unchangingly and forever love the Creator and Savior of our souls. (Treatise 12: 10, pp- 277-278)

On October 14, 1604, St. Francis wrote the following in a letter to St. Jane de Chantal:

“What I mean is the liberty of children who know that they are loved. And what is that? The complete detachment of a Christian heart following God’s known will...The first thing we ask of God (in the Lord’s Prayer) is that God’s name be hallowed, that his kingdom may come and that his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. What else can this be but the spirit of liberty?” (Stopp, Selected Letters, pp. 70 – 74)

Francis cites three indicators or signs of the presence – and practice – of this liberty in our lives:

1. “The heart enjoying this liberty is not at all attached to consolations and accepts affliction with all the gentleness possible to the flesh. I am not saying that the soul does not love consolation and long for it, but does so without clinging to it.”

2. “A person who has this spirit does not set his heart on spiritual exercises, and if illness or some other emergency prevents them he is in no way upset. I am not saying that he does not love them, but he is not attached to them.”

3. “A person does not lose his/her joy because no loss or lack can sadden one whose heart is perfectly free. I am not saying that it is impossible to lose one’s joy, but it will not last for long.”

The effects/results?

- Great sweetness of mind

- Great gentleness

- Ready kindness in everything which does not include sin

- Supple and gentle attitude which is ready to do anything virtuous and charitable

God creates us to live in freedom; God fashions us to experience the liberty that comes from ‘knowing that we are loved.’ How can we be signs and sources of that heavenly liberty for others here on this earth in both revolutionary – and ordinary – ways today?

July 15, 2011: Bonaventure

Today we observe the memorial of St. Bonaventure: religious, bishop and Doctor of the Church.

In his Treatise on the Love of God (*Book 6 on prayer*), Francis de Sales wrote:

“We do not use the word ‘prayer’ solely for petition or ‘demand for some good, poured out by the faithful before God,’ as St. Basil calls it. We use the term as St. Bonaventure does when he says that prayer, generally speaking, comprehends all the acts of contemplation; or, like St. Gregory of Nyssa, who teaches that ‘prayer is a conference or conversation of the soul with God,’ or again like St. John Chrysostom, who asserts that ‘prayer is discussion with the divine majesty, or finally like St. Augustine and St. John Damascene, who say that ‘prayer is an ascent or elevation of the mind to God. If prayer is a colloquy, a discussion or a conversation of the soul with God, then by prayer we speak to God and God in turn speaks to us. We aspire to him and breathe in him; he reciprocally inspires us and breathes upon us.” (TLG: Book 6, Chapter 1, p. 268)

Seems safe to say that there are as many definitions and/or understandings of “prayer” as there are people. What’s your definition or notion of prayer? How does it help you to become the person that God aspires – and inspires – you to be?

July 22, 2011: Mary Magdalene

Today we celebrate the Memorial of St. Magdalene: called the “apostle of the Apostles.”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote: “I ask you to consider how the beloved Magdalene weeps out of love. ‘They have taken away my Lord,’ she says, melting away in tears, ‘and I do not know where they have laid him,’ but when she has found him again with sighs and tears, she holds keeps him by love. Imperfect love desires and asks for him; penitence seeks and finds him; perfect love holds and clasps him.” (TLG, Book 2, Chapter 20, p. 155)

There is something of all three levels of love within each of us: that love which desires and asks for God; that love which seeks and finds God; that love which holds and clasps God. However, it is important to remember the divine context in which we experience and embody that love: it is God’s perfect, eternal love that has taken hold of each and every one of us: a divine, eternal love that will never let us go.

July 29, 2011: Martha

Today we observe the Memorial of St. Martha: model of hospitality and faithful disciple; patroness of housewives, waiters and waitresses.

In his Spiritual Conferences (IX, *On Religious Modesty*), Francis de Sales remarked:

“Inward modesty maintains the powers of our souls in tranquility and moderation, avoiding, as I have already said, curiosity of the understanding over which it chiefly exercises its control, retrenching also from our will its innumerable desires, and directing it simply to that *one thing which Mary chose, and which shall not be taken from her*: that is, the will to please God. Martha represents very well the want of control in the will, for she is too eager: she sets all the servants of the house to work; she goes hither and thither without pausing for a moment, so anxious is she to treat Our Lord well; and she seems to think that she will never have enough dishes prepared to entertain Him. In the same way, the will which is not restrained by moderation flits from one subject to another in order to stimulate itself to love God and to desire many means of serving Him, and yet, so many things are not needed. Better is it to cling to God like Mary, sitting at His feet, asking Him to give us His love, than to be thinking how and by what means we can acquire it...” (pp. 143-144)

Martha is a model of hospitality; Martha sets the standard of the lengths that one might go in welcoming another. Nevertheless, as we see in Martha’s interchange with Jesus - and about Mary - the love of hospitality can become – however unintentionally - a virtuous liability when we allow our enthusiasm for getting things right to become anxiety about making things perfect.

Indeed, we should imitate Martha in our efforts at welcoming others, i.e., doing our level best to make other feel ‘at home.’ However, in a spirit of inward modesty let us do our level best to avoid reeking havoc in our attempts to be hospitable.

August 4: John Mary Vianney

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of John Mary Vianney, universally known as the “Cure of Ars.”

John Vianney is best remembered for his spiritual counsel. People began came to him from other parishes, then from distant places, then from all parts of France and finally from other countries. During the last ten years of his life, he spent from sixteen to eighteen hours a day in the confessional. His advice was sought by bishops, priests, religious, young men and women discerning their vocations, sinners, persons in all sorts of difficulties and the sick. In 1855, the number of pilgrims had reached twenty thousand a year. His instructions were simple in language, full of imagery drawn from daily life and country scenes, but breathing faith and that love of God

which was his life principle and which he infused into his audience as much by his manner and appearance as by his words, for, at the last, his voice was almost inaudible. Throughout his years of this arduous ministry of listening to the hearts of others, he labored incessantly, with unfailing humility, gentleness, patience, and cheerfulness, until he was more than seventy-three years old. (See www.newadvent.org.)

Some two hundred and thirty years before John Vianney's death, another person destined to be declared a saint was described in a similar fashion:

“He received all comers with the same expression of quiet friendliness, and never turned anyone away, whatever their station in life; he always listened with unhurried calmness and for as long as people felt they needed to talk. People longed to have a taste of that great sweetness and serenity of heart which he invariably gave them and which helped people to open up to him with great confidence, especially when they wanted to talk about spiritual things.” (Stopp, pp.138 – 139)

The source of this observation? St. Jane de Chantal. The focus of this observation? St. Francis de Sales himself. (Taken from her testimony given during the first canonization inquiry in 1627.)

On the face of it, there is nothing very remarkable about being remembered as a ‘good listener.’ However, ask any of the people who ever had the opportunity to be deeply listened to by Francis de Sales or John Vianney, and you might discover something altogether different.

Like one the qualities most frequently associated with what it takes to become a saint.

August 12, 2011: Jane Frances de Chantal

Today we celebrate one of the two great wellsprings of Salesian spirituality in the person of Jane Frances de Chantal: wife, mother, widow, founder, administrator, negotiator and friend.

In his preface to the book The Spirit of Saint Jane Frances de Chantal as Shown by Her Letters (Sisters of the Visitation, Harrow-on-the-Hill. Longmans, Green and Company: London, 1922), his Eminence Francis Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, observed that letters can provide the reader with a great deal more insight into a person's character when compared with a mere compilation of places, persons and events.

He wrote: “All this is strikingly verified in the case of Saint Jane Frances. She was a Mother whose care and solicitude for her children accompanied her cloistered life and gave to it special anxieties. In the spiritual order she was the Mother of a great religious institute, marvelously multiplied within the span of her own life; she was, consequently, in daily and indeed more than hourly contact with a multitude of women of varied rank and education, all, it is true, vowed to strive after a life of perfection, but each with her own particular disposition, often far from perfect in some respect or another. Then she had (even while fulfilling the part of Mary” to be occupied about “many things,” and, as her letters show, not without trouble concerning them. Ladies of generous disposition – but wayward in their generosity – often needed to be humored in the interest of her foundations. Spiritual advisors – duly appointed or self-constituted – sometimes needed very tactful management. Even ecclesiastical authorities – not gifted with the sound sense and supernatural illumination of St. Francis de Sales – required humble resistance when after his death they sought unwisely to improve the work entrusted to St. Jane's vigilant and filial care. There is indeed scarcely a contingency in the perplexing interplay of human aim, motive and infirmity that confronts everyone to whom God entrusts a public work which will not find in these letters some guidance and enlightenment.”

His Eminence's conclusion? “Saint Jane Frances de Chantal was a woman of exceptional strength of character and of remarkable experience in dealing with other people, as well as a great Saint living in close union with – and in entire dependence upon – the Divine Will.”

The Father has entrusted to each of us something of God's great ‘public work,’ i.e., the challenge to “Live

Jesus:” to accept the gift of God’s love in our own lives and to share the gift of God’s love in our relationships with others. Let us imitate the example of Jane de Chantal as we go about this work each and every day by displaying (1) exceptional strength of character, and (2) a remarkable ability to deal with other people.

Who knows? We might experience close union with – and dependence upon – the Divine Will more closely than we might otherwise have imagined!

Or achieved.

August 20, 2011: Bernard

Today we observe the (M)emorial of Bernard of Clairvaux: religious, abbot, author reformer and Doctor of the Church.

Francis de Sales held St. Bernard in very high esteem. In his Treatise on the Love of God (*Book 3, Chapter 12*), Francis de Sales wrote:

“While still a young child, St. Bernard was waiting in church one Christmas night for the beginning of the divine office, and as he waited the poor child fell into a very light sleep. During it he saw in spirit (but in a vision that was very distinct and clear) how the Son of God, having espoused human nature and become a little child in his Mother’s most pure body, was virginally born of her sacred womb. In that birth sweet humility was mingled with heavenly majesty...” (pp. 193 - 140)

Each and every one of us is created in the image and likeness of God. In each of us is embodied something of “sweet humility” mingled with heavenly majesty. Do we treat ourselves – do we treat others – accordingly?

August 25, 2011: Louis IX of France

Today we celebrate the memorial of Louis IX: ruler, father of eleven.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote: “I can never sufficiently admire St. Louis, one of the greatest kings upon whom the sun has ever shone. He was a great king, I say, with every kind of greatness. He often served at table the poor whom he supported and had three of them dine with him almost every day. Many times he ate what was left over of their food with incomparable love. When he visited the hospitals of the sick, as he often did, he usually served those who had the most loathsome diseases, such as lepers, the ulcerous and others like them. He performed all these services with uncovered head and kneeling on the ground, thus honoring in their persons the Savior of the world and cherishing them with as tender a love as a fond mother cherishes her child....’Blessed are they who are poor in this manner, for to them belongs the kingdom of heaven.’ He who is King of the poor and of kings will say this at the great judgment.”

“He was a great king, with every kind of greatness.” In the end, what makes a person great is not what they possess; rather, greatness is a function of how – and with whom – one shares one’s possessions. Francis de Sales honored St. Louis because of the manner in which he honored others. What made this noble ruler noble was his generous service to his subjects, especially to the poorest and most vulnerable among them...not unlike the greatest Ruler of all – the King of kings – Jesus himself.

How might we be great today?

August 29, 2011: The Martyrdom of John the Baptizer

Today we observe the (M)emorial of the martyrdom of John the Baptizer.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales observed:

“When we say that many of the martyrs died for the faith, we must not imply that it was for a ‘dead faith’ but rather for a living faith, that is, faith animated by charity. Such was the Savior’s great Precursor who suffered martyrdom because he gave fraternal correction.”(TLG, Book 7, Chapter 10, p. 41)

In other words, John was martyred for telling the truth.

Particularly relevant in the case of the life – and death – of John the Baptizer are these words from the ‘Gentleman Saint:’ “While it is not always advisable to say all that is true, it is never permissible to speak against the truth.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 30) Herod was giving scandal by taking his brother’s wife as his own; for John, the only thing more scandalous would be to keep silent about it. John had to have been aware of the possible perils of speaking the truth; regardless, speak the truth he did. When faced with a choice – losing his head for speaking up, or losing his integrity by shutting up – he chose the former.

The word martyr means “witness.” Made in the image and likeness of the “God of truth,” each of us is called to bear witness to the power, the promise and the precepts of truth. When it comes to ‘walking the walk and talking the talk’ of truth, what price are we willing to pay for our witness?

September 3: Gregory the Great

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of St. Gregory the Great: writer, preacher, pope and Doctor of the Church.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote: “I am of St. Gregory’s opinion that when you are justly accused of some fault you have committed you must genuinely humble yourself and confess that you deserve the charge brought against you. If the accusation is false, excuse yourself and meekly deny your guilt, for you owe respect to the truth and to the edification of your neighbor. If they continue to accuse you after you have made your true and legitimate explanation, don’t be disturbed and don’t try to make them accept your explanation. When you have discharged your duty to the truth, you must also do the same to humility. In this way you offend against neither the care you must have for your own good name nor the concern you must have for peace, meekness of heart and humility.” (IDL, Part III, Ch. 3)

To live in the truth requires us to humbly acknowledge when others’ accusations against us are true. To live in the truth also requires us to clearly state when others’ accusations against us are false. The tough part? In either case, being willing – and able – to let the chips fall where they may.

Jesus assures us that the ‘truth will set you free.’ Jesus never claimed that living it that truth would be easy.

September 8, 2011: Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Especially since the time of the Reformation, Catholics have often been accused of ‘worshipping’ Mary. In his Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin, St. Louis-Marie de Montfort (31 January 1673 – 28 April 1716) observed:

“Jesus, our Savior, true God and true man must be the ultimate end of all our other devotions; otherwise they would be false and misleading. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of everything. ‘We labor,’ says St. Paul, ‘only to make all men perfect in Jesus Christ.’ For in him alone dwells the entire fullness of the divinity and the complete fullness of grace, virtue and perfection. In him alone we have been blessed

with every spiritual blessing; he is the only teacher from whom we must learn; the only Lord on whom we should depend; the only Head to whom we should be united and the only model that we should imitate. He is the only Physician that can heal us; the only Shepherd that can feed us; the only Way that can lead us; the only Truth that we can believe; the only Life that can animate us. He alone is everything to us and he alone can satisfy all our desires.”

“If then we are establishing sound devotion to our Blessed Lady, it is only in order to establish devotion to our Lord more perfectly, by providing a smooth but certain way of reaching Jesus Christ. If devotion to our Lady distracted us from our Lord, we would have to reject it as an illusion of the devil. But this is far from being the case. As I have already shown and will show again later on, this devotion is necessary, simply and solely because it is a way of reaching Jesus perfectly, loving him tenderly, and serving him faithfully.”

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/Montfort/TRUEDEVO.HTM>)

Francis de Sales put it this way: “A person who desires to please God and our Lady does what is very good, but one who would like to please our Lady as much as God – or even more than God – would commit an intolerable breach of order. We might say to such a person what was said to Cain: ‘If you have offered well but have wrongly divided, stop, you have sinned.’ To each end we must give its proper rank, and consequently supreme rank to the end of pleasing God.” (TLG, Book XI, Ch. 13)

So, as to the question if Catholics *worship* Mary, the answer is a resounding “No.” As to the question if Catholics are *devoted* to Mary, the answer is: “Absolutely!” In giving her honor, we give praise to the One who gave birth to her, as well as to the Word to whom she gave birth! Would that our devotion to Mary could hold a candle to her devotion to God...and to God’s Will in her life.

And our lives, as well.

September 15, 2011: Our Lady of Sorrows

Today we observe the (M)emorial of Our Lady of Sorrows, following (*by design*) the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross...a triumph, as Mary experience all-too-deeply, that did not come without cost, without suffering or without sorrow.

Among other things.

Francis de Sales wrote: “O God, it is now, my dear Theotimus, that we must show unconquerable fidelity to the Savior, serving him purely for love of his will, not only without pleasure but under a deluge of sorrow, horror, dread and attack, as did his glorious Mother and St. John on the day of his passion. Amid all the blasphemy, sorrow and deadly distress they remained firm in love, yes, even when the Savior, having withdrawn all his holy joy up into the very summit of his spirit, showed forth no joy or consolation at all on his divine face but, with eyes fading or covered over with the shadows of death, cast down only looks of sorrow even as the sun cast down rays of horror and fearsome shadows.” (TLG, Book IX, Ch. 11)

There is so much more to love than pain and sorrow. Then again, true love does have – and will have – its share of pain and sorrow. Remember the farewell scene in the *Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy (and Toto, too!) must part company with their three companions? Dorothy says: “Goodbye, Tin Man. Oh, don't cry! You'll rust so dreadfully. Here's your oil can.” The Tin Man replies: “Now I know I've got a heart, 'cause it's breaking...”

As the Tin Man learned from his own experience, as painful as a broken heart may be, it beats the alternative hands down.

Having no heart at all.

September 23, 2011: Pio of Pietrelcina

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of “Padre Pio,” a Capuchin priest who lived for fifty years in the monastery of san Giovanni Rotondo. The Ordo describes him as a man whom many people sought in a variety of roles: spiritual advisor, confessor and intercessor. Pio is quoted as having often said: “I only want to be a poor friar who prays.”

During my novitiate year (1977-1978) there was a heavy emphasis upon mental prayer or meditation (also referred to by St. Francis de Sales as ‘prayer of the heart’), especially at the beginning of each new day: from 6:30 AM – 7:00 AM every morning, community members gathered together in the chapel for a half hour of meditation.

Speaking for myself, it was a painful – and frustrating – exercise. I am not proud to admit that most of my ‘meditation’ was spent merely trying to remain awake. By the middle of February (a sometimes-tipping-point during the novitiate year) I confided to my novice master that I had reached the conclusion that I did not have the gift for praying deeply. Following several seconds of silence that seemed like an eternity to me, my novice master quietly replied: “OK. Then why not try to be a deep man, who prays?”

Thirty-some years later that may be one of the few things that I still clearly remember from my novitiate year. But I can tell you from experience that my novice master’s suggestion has made all the difference in my life every year since.

Padre Pio just wanted to be a poor friar who prayed. In that deep man many came to discover a deep well of light, love and laughter that helped them to find their unique path to prayer...and action...in their own lives.

By entering life deeply; by being deep people.

September 29, 2011: Michael, Gabriel & Raphael - Archangels

Today we observe the Feast of the Archangels:

- Michael in the Hebrew language means "*Who is like unto God?*" or "*Who is equal to God?*" St. Michael has been depicted from earliest Christian times as a commander, who holds in his right hand a spear with which he attacks Lucifer/Satan, and in his left hand a green palm branch. At the top of the spear there is a linen ribbon with a red cross. The Archangel Michael is especially considered to be the guardian of the faith and a fighter against heresies.
- Gabriel means "*Man of God*" or "*Might of God.*" He is the herald of the mysteries of God, especially the Incarnation of God and all other mysteries related to it. He is depicted as follows: In his right hand, he holds a lantern with a lighted taper inside, and in his left hand, a mirror of green jasper. The mirror signifies the wisdom of God as a hidden mystery.
- Raphael means "*God's healing*" or "*God the Healer*" (Tobit 3:17, 12:15). Raphael is depicted leading Tobit (who is carrying a fish caught in the Tigris) with his right hand, and holding a physician's alabaster jar in his left hand.

In his conference on “*Constancy*” (p. 40), Francis de Sales observed: “I dwell on this expression – the Angel of the Lord – and I ask you to observe how highly we ought to esteem the care, the succor, the assistance and the direction of those whom God encompasses us in order to help us walk surely in the path of perfection...”

What better way to honor the Archangels – and all angels, for that matter – than by imitating their example: by helping one another “to walk surely in the path of perfection”?

October 4: Francis of Assisi

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of St. Francis of Assisi: religious and mendicant.

In his book On the Preacher and Preaching, John K. Ryan reminds us that St. Francis of Assisi was Francis de Sales' namesake and patron. No surprise, then, that Francis de Sales held Assisi in great esteem and mentioned him many times throughout his writings. We find one such example in the Treatise on the Love of God. Francis de Sales observed:

“A heart seized and urged on by a desire to praise God’s goodness beyond its own abilities after many such efforts often goes outside itself so as to enlist all creatures to help it in its designs. We see how the three children in the furnace do this in that wonderful canticle of blessings by which they arouse up all things in heaven on the earth and under the earth to render thanks to the eternal God by supremely praising and blessing him. So, too, the glorious Psalmist, moved through-and-through by a disordered but holy passion that bore him on to praise God, proceeds without order. In all haste he calls on angels, fishes, mountains, waters, dragons, birds, serpents, fire, hail, and mist, gathering together by his desires all creatures so that they may conspire devoutly to magnify their creator. Some of them in themselves celebrate God’s praise; others provide matter for praising him by their various wonderful properties which manifest the grandeur of their maker. Therefore after this divine, royal Psalmist had composed a great number of the psalms with the inscription ‘Praise God’ and had gone through a vast variety of ways and instruments suitable to celebrate the praise of such eternal goodness, finally, as if failing for lack of breath, he concludes his whole scared psalmody with this cry, ‘Let every spirit praise the Lord,’ that is, ‘Let all that lives live and breathe only to bless the creator...’ Thus did the great St. Francis [of Assisi] chant the ‘Canticle of the Sun’ and a hundred other excellent benedictions to invoke creatures to come and aid his heart, languishing because he could not praise his soul’s dear Savior as he wished...”

How grateful are we for God’s goodness in our regard? How thankful are we for all the good things that God has done – and continues to do – for us? How might we make our lives convincing canticles or benedictions of praise to the eternal God who showers us with so many blessings?

October 15, 2011: Teresa of Avila, a.k.a. Teresa of Jesus

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582): virgin, religious, writer, mystic, Doctor of the Church.

In the context of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and/or spiritual direction, a surprising number of people report having problems with being ‘distracted’ at prayer. In his Treatise on the Love of God, St. Francis de Sales wrote:

“The soul to whom God gives holy, loving quietude in prayer must abstain as much as possible from regarding either itself or its repose. To be guarded, this repose must not be regarded. The person who loves it too much loses it. The right rule for having proper affection for it is not to affect concern over it. A child wanting to see where its feet are placed turns its head away from its mother’s breast but immediately turns back since it is so dear to it. So, too, if we find we are distracted by curiosity to know what we do in prayer we must immediately replace our hearts in that sweet, peaceful attention to God’s presence from which we have strayed. Nevertheless, we must not think that there is any danger of losing this sacred quietude by bodily or mental actions that are not done out of carelessness or indiscretion. As the Blessed Mother Teresa [of Avila] says, it is superstitious to be so concerned over this repose as not to cough, spit or breathe for fear of losing it. God, who gives us this peace, does not take it away because of such necessary movements, or because of involuntary distractions and wanderings of the mind. Once the will has been strongly to God’s presence, it does not cease to relish its sweetness even though the intellect or memory should escape and slip away after irrelevant or useless thoughts.” (TLG, Book 6, Chapter 10)

On any given day seemingly limitless things constantly vie for our limited attention: not always being able to think about those we love each and every moment doesn't mean that we love them any less. So, too, when it comes to prayer: so-called 'distractions' from being mindful of the presence of God – or being in the presence of God – don't actually become distractions until we allow them to actually distract us. As Teresa of Avila clearly understood, the greatest distraction to undistracted prayer is trying to pray without being distracted.

Think about it...but not to the point of distraction!

October 17, 2011: Ignatius of Antioch

Today we observe the (M)emorial of St. Ignatius of Antioch: bishop and martyr.

In a letter to Jane de Chantal (26 January 1615, of the occasion of preparations being made for the first Visitation foundation to be made in Lyons) Francis de Sales wrote: "I have been thinking about the story of the great St. Ignatius who carried Jesus Christ in his heart and cheerfully went to serve as food for the lions and suffer the martyrdom of their fangs: and here you are, here we are, going to Lyons, please our Savior, to render Our lord various services and prepare souls for him so that he can be their bridegroom. What can stop us from going joyfully in the name of our Savior, since this saint went so blithely to be martyred for our Savior?(Stopp, Selected Letters, pp. 227-228)

St. Francis de Sales marveled at St. Ignatius joy-filled heart as he prepared for a violent end; St. Francis de Sales encouraged St. Jane de Chantal to have a joy-filled heart as she prepared for a new beginning. The lesson for each of us? Whether it be in the experiences of taking hold or letting go – of building up, or tearing down – let us do our level best to walk joyfully in the presence of our Savior.

And with one another.

October 24, 2011: Anthony Claret

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of Anthony Claret, bishop.

On AmericanCatholic.org, we read the following on the life of Anthony:

"The 'spiritual father of Cuba' was a missionary, religious founder, social reformer, queen's chaplain, writer and publisher, archbishop and refugee. He was a Spaniard whose work took him to the Canary Islands, Cuba, Madrid, Paris and to the First Vatican Council. Ordained a priest at the age of 28, the former textile worker was prevented by ill health from entering religious life as a Carthusian or as a Jesuit."

"He spent 10 years giving popular missions and retreats, always placing great emphasis on the Eucharist and devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The rosary, it was said, was never out of his hand. At the age of 42, beginning with five young priests, he founded a religious institute of missionaries, known today as the Claretians. He was appointed to head the much-neglected archdiocese of Santiago in Cuba. He began its reform by almost ceaseless preaching and hearing of confessions, and suffered bitter opposition mainly for stamping out concubinage and giving instruction to black slaves. His solution for the misery of Cubans was family-owned farms producing a variety of foods for the family's own needs and for the market. This invited the enmity of the vested interests who wanted everyone to work on a single cash crop—sugar. Besides his religious writings are two books he wrote in Cuba: Reflections on Agriculture and Country Delights."

"He was recalled to Spain for a job he did not relish—being chaplain for the queen. He went on three conditions: (1) He would reside away from the palace; (2) he would come only to hear the queen's confession

and instruct the children and (3) he would be exempt from court functions. During the revolution of 1868, he was forced to flee with the queen's party to Paris, where he preached to the Spanish colony."

"All his life Anthony was interested in the Catholic press. He founded the Religious Publishing House, a major Catholic publishing venture in Spain, and wrote or published 200 books and pamphlets. At Vatican I, where he was a staunch defender of the doctrine of infallibility, he won the admiration of his fellow bishops. Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore remarked of him, 'There goes a true saint.' At the age of 63, he died in exile near the border of Spain.

* * * * *

Story has it that Queen Isabella II once said to Anthony, "No one tells me things as clearly and frankly as you do." Some time later she told her chaplain, "Everybody is always asking me for favors, but you never do. Isn't there something you would like for yourself?" He replied, "Yes: that you let me resign." The queen made no more offers.

Among his many virtues, sounds like St. Anthony had a sense of humor, too.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, St. Francis de Sales wrote: "Mirth and banter cause laughter by unaffected freedom, confidence and familiarity cleverly expressed." (IDL, Part III, Ch. 27) As we know from our own experience, sometimes there is nothing more freeing than a good laugh...even among the saints.

October 31, 2011: Halloween

"Christian attitudes towards Halloween are diverse. In the Anglican Church, some dioceses have chosen to emphasize the Christian traditions of All Saints' Day, while some other Protestants celebrate the holiday as Reformation Day, a day to remember the Protestant Reformation. A Vatican-appointed exorcist in Rome, has said, 'If English and American children like to dress up as witches and devils on one night of the year that is not a problem. If it is just a game, there is no harm in that.' In more recent years, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston has organized a "Saint Fest" on the holiday. Similarly, many contemporary Protestant churches view Halloween as a fun event for children, holding events in their churches where children and their parents can dress up, play games, and get candy for free."

"Many Christians ascribe no negative significance to Halloween, treating it as a purely secular holiday devoted to celebrating 'imaginary spooks' and handing out candy. To these Christians, Halloween holds no threat to the spiritual lives of children: being taught about death and mortality, and the ways of the Celtic ancestors actually being a valuable life lesson and a part of many of their parishioners' heritage. In the Roman Catholic Church, Halloween is viewed as having a Christian connection, and Halloween celebrations are common in Catholic parochial schools throughout North America and in Ireland." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halloween>)

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales observed: "Let us remember to pass our recreation time in such a way that we may gain a holy eternity by devotion." (IDL, Part III, Ch 28) Safe to say that Halloween provides ample opportunities for recreation to be had by children of all ages...even if at the cost of a few extra pounds!

Either way, can you say, "Trick or treat?"

November 1, 2011: All Saints

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of All Saints.

In a conference to the Sisters of the Visitation, Francis de Sales made the following observation: "Some of the

saints excelled in one virtue, some in another, and although all have saved their souls, they have done so in very different ways, there being as many different kinds of sanctity as there are saints.” (Conf XIX, p. 365) In another place he wrote: “Choose certain particular saints whose lives you can best appreciate and imitate and in whose intercession you may have particular confidence.” (IDL, Part II, Ch. 16)

All of us are called to live holy lives; all of us are called to practice a life of devotion; in a word, all of us are called to be saints. However, sanctity is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ situation. Becoming a saint isn’t like being like everyone else. From a Salesian perspective, the essence of holiness – of sainthood – is having the courage to be the unique, once-in-a-lifetime person that God has called each of us to be, and to be that person in accord with how God wants us to be that person.

Of course, striving to “be who you are and to be that perfectly well” (as imperfect as we are!) is hard work. Therefore, let us not merely learn from the saints who have lived before us: in addition, let us ask for their support, encouragement and inspiration. Hard enough to become a saint without trying to be yourself all by yourself.

November 4, 2011: Charles Borromeo

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584): bishop.

In one of the end notes to his book On the Preacher and Preaching, John K. Ryan wrote in 1963:

“St. Charles Borromeo, a cardinal at the age of 22 and archbishop of Milan at the age of 25, was one of the greatest names in the counter-reformation and the leading figure in the closing sessions of the council of Trent. Generally recognized as a saint soon after his death (at the age of 46), he was canonized in 1610. St. Francis de Sales had great admiration for him and together with some of the clergy of his diocese made a pilgrimage to his tomb in April, 1613. Will the record of the Second Vatican council show the presence and influence of someone like St. Charles Borromeo...?”

Four years later, in his apostolic letter *Sabuadiae gemma*, Pope Paul VI made the following remarks:

“The experience of the past and that which can be read about it clearly show that the Ecumenical Councils have produced favorable results both during their sessions and after their conclusion when truly holy churchmen and pastors recognized for their virtue devoted themselves to bringing the statutes and decrees of the councils to fulfillment by themselves becoming the living embodiments of the law which they proposed. That just such men - distinguished by their holiness - might come forth into the light and before the public eye, is that for which all good men plead and wait in their hidden desires. Perhaps it will be from your very midst that the dawn of this brilliant light will come. Whatever happens, one must be confident. We possess a teacher, an author, a doctor who will help you and many others who share with you the charge of the episcopal office. He will lead the way and, going before you, will conduct you to true, holy, and worthwhile accomplishments. We have no doubt that the truth which he teaches when studied as it ought to be will conquer all. No one of the recent Doctors of the Church more than St. Francis de Sales anticipated the deliberations and decisions of the Second Vatican Council with such a keen and progressive insight. He renders his contribution by the example of his life, by the wealth of his true and sound doctrine, by the fact that he has opened and strengthened the spiritual ways of Christian perfection for all states and conditions in life. We propose that these three things be imitated, embraced, and followed...”

And again:

“In the conversations he fostered with Christians of another confession, St. Francis de Sales anticipated by several centuries our time and our practices. His method and his manner of acting are for us a vivid light and an example to be imitated. In him the highest sanctity was united to the greatest affability and good will. Free of all aggressiveness in discussion, he loved those who had gone astray, while he corrected their errors. For his

diversity was not a version: he approached light with another light. Persistent in love, prayer, and the concern to enlighten, he knew how to wait a long time. He knew how to lead gradually to the fullness of truth those who had wandered from it, from that truth from which one can not wander and which no one has the power to diminish. What result and success did he have? By his efforts in the Chablais alone 72,000 came back to communion with the Apostolic See...

Recall Msgr. Ryan's strikingly prescient question: *"Will the record of the Second Vatican council show the presence and influence of someone like St. Charles Borromeo...?"* Seems that no less than a Pope provided the answer with a resounding "YES." Without his having actually attended the Second Vatican Council, it seems that Francis de Sales had a profound impact upon it.

Talk about the power that comes from admiring – and imitating – the life of a particular saint!

November 10, 2011: Leo the Great

Today we observe the (M)emorial of St. Leo the Great: pope and Doctor of the Church.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales posed this question: "Why do we love ourselves in charity? Surely, it is because we are God's image and likeness. Since all people have this same dignity, we also love them as ourselves, that is, in their character are most holy and living images of the divinity. It is in this character that we are related to God by such close alliance and such loving dependence that nothing prevents God from saying that he is our Father and from calling us his children. It is in this character that we are capable of being united to his divine essence by enjoyment of his supreme goodness and bliss. It is in this character that we receive his grace and our spirits are associated with his most Holy Spirit, and as it were 'we are made partakers of his divine nature,' as St. Leo says. Hence, the same charity that produces acts of love of God produces at the same time those of love of neighbor." (TLG, Book X, Ch. 11)

If we are so good, why is it that we find ourselves treating others – and even ourselves – so poorly so often? Perhaps it is simply (and sadly) because we lose sight of that goodness in ourselves and in others, and when we lose sight of it, we forget it. As the saying goes, 'Out of sight, out of mind.'

And, unfortunately, out of heart, too.

November 11, 2011: Martin of Tours

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of St. Martin of Tours: bishop, religious.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales writes about the 'indifferent' heart:

"The indifferent heart...loves tribulation as much as consolation, although the latter is more agreeable in itself. It has even greater love for tribulation because it sees in it nothing to be loved except the mark of God's will. If I like only pure water, what does it matter to me whether it is served in a goblet of gold or in one of glass, since in either case I drink only the water? In fact, I will prefer it in the glass since the glass has the same color as the water, which I can thus see much better. What does it matter, then, whether God's will is offered to me in tribulation or in consolation? In each of them I neither desire nor seek anything except the divine will, which is better seen because no beauty is present there but that of God's most holy, eternal good pleasure."

"Heroic, yes more than heroic, is the indifference of St. Paul the incomparable. 'I am hard pressed,' he says to the Philippians, 'from two sides, desiring to be delivered from this body and to be with Christ – a thing far better – and yet to remain in this life for your sake.' He was imitated in this by the great bishop St. Martin [of Tours] who, when he came to the end of his life and was pressed with an extreme desire to go to God, still

testified that he would most willingly remain to carry out the tasks laid upon him for the good of his beloved flock. It was as if he had sung this canticle:
How beautiful to see your shining courts,
O Lord! How like are they to mighty forts
Where dauntless angel hosts forever dwell
And ever sing unto your holy name,
And raise up paeans to your praise and fame,
Greater by far than mind and tongue can tell!
My soul and flesh leap up in 'raptured strife
To join that throng with you, O God of life!"

"Then he continued to cry out, 'Nevertheless, Lord, if I am still needed to serve for the salvation of your people, I do not refuse the labor. Your will be done!'" (TLG, Bk IX, Ch. 4)

In the Salesian tradition, being 'indifferent' doesn't mean we don't care. Quite the opposite: being 'indifferent' means that we care deeply about God, the will of God and the things of God. What we strive to care about far less are the situations and circumstances in and through which God's will is revealed to us. To be sure, we would prefer consolation to tribulation as the means by which we know God's will; in the end, however, (as we see in the cases of St. Paul and St. Martin) devotion challenges us to acknowledge that whether it be in consolation, tribulation or everything else in between that however God reveals God's will to us is up to God.

Not us.

November 16, 2011: Gertrude

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of St. Gertrude "The Great:" religious, mystic, writer.

In his conference on "The Will of God," Francis de Sales gave the following illustration:

"I will give you another admirable example to make you understand...the value of obedience, self-effacement and pliability of will in following the desire of any one, but especially that of our Superiors. St. Gertrude became a nun in a convent in which there was a Superior who was aware that the blessed Saint was of a most frail and delicate constitution. The Superior on this account had her treated more tenderly than the other nuns, not permitting her to practice the austerities customary in that order. What, then do you think the poor Religious did in order to become a Saint? Nothing but submit with all simplicity to the Superior's will. And although her fervor would have made her long to do what the others were doing, yet she gave no sign of this...In a word, obedience is the salt which gives savor and relish to all our actions, and makes them worthy of eternal life..." (Conf XV, pp. 289 – 290)

This example is very instructive to those who struggle with the notion (to say nothing of the practice) of "obedience." Being obedient isn't about giving mindless consent; obedience isn't simply a matter of 'doing what you're told.' Obedience is the pliability of will that comes from really listening for and to God's will in the situations and circumstances of every day life...and being willing to say "yes" to God's will, not only in word but in action. In the example of Gertrude, Francis de Sales suggests that her willingness to accept the directions of her superior had far more redemptive and transforming power in her life than any multitude of austerities that she might otherwise have practiced had she been able to do so.

So, too, for us. What has more value in the eyes of God? A thousand things we might do because we want to do them for God, or one simple thing we actually do because it is what God wants us to do for God?

Today we celebrate the life and legacy of St. Elizabeth of Hungary: wife, mother, widow and religious.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“St. Elizabeth, daughter of the King of Hungary, often visited the poor. For recreation among her ladies she sometimes clothed herself like a poor woman, saying to them, ‘If I were poor I would dress in this manner.’ O God, how poor was...this princess in the midst of all her riches and how rich was their poverty!” (IDL, Part III, Ch. 15)

The richness of poverty. Interesting notion.

In the Salesian tradition, poverty of spirit (“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for to them belongs the kingdom of heaven”) is less about doing without; rather, it has a lot more to do with how generous I am with what I have. Elizabeth didn’t serve those without by renouncing what she had; she served the poor by placing what she had at their disposal.

How might we practice poverty today, and know the true richness – and wealth – that flows from that practice?

November 22, 2011: Cecilia

Today we celebrate the (M)emorial of St. Cecilia: virgin, martyr.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“The indifferent heart is like a ball of wax in God’s hands, ready to receive all the impressions of his eternal good pleasure. It is a heart without preference, equally ready for all things and having no other object for its will except the will of God...God’s good pleasure is found in both marriage and virginity...the indifferent heart chooses virginity, even though it might cost its life. So it was St. Tecla, St. Paul’s dear spiritual daughter, St. Cecilia, St. Agatha and a thousand others....To sum up, God’s good pleasure is the supreme object of the indifferent soul...It would prefer hell with God’s will to paradise without God’s will. Yes, it would prefer hell to paradise if it knew that it would find a little more of God’s good pleasure in hell than in heaven.” (TLG, Book IX, Ch. 4)

A driving force, this ‘indifference’ of heart!

St.Cecilia did not choose the practice of virginity because it was her preference; she chose a life of virginity because she discerned that it was God’s good pleasure for her to live her life that way. The strength of this conviction gave her the courage required to be martyred for her fidelity to that same Divine good pleasure.

How is God calling me to live my life today? What is God’s good pleasure in my regard? How far am I willing to go in the attempt to be faithful to who – and how – God wants me to be in the lives of others?

November 24, 2011: Thanksgiving Day

Today is a national holiday in the United States of America.

“Thanksgiving Day, a legal holiday in the U.S., was first celebrated in early colonial times in New England. After the first harvest was completed by the Plymouth colonists in 1621, Governor William Bradford proclaimed a day of thanksgiving and prayer, shared by all the colonists and neighboring Native Americans. The Pilgrims of Plymouth Rock held their Thanksgiving in 1621 as a three day "thank you" celebration to the leaders of the Wampanoag Indian tribe and their families for teaching them the survival skills they needed to make it in theNew World.”

“After the first New England Thanksgiving the custom spread throughout the colonies, but each region chose its own date. In 1789 George Washington, the first president of the United States, proclaimed November 26 a day of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving day continued to be celebrated in the United States on different days in different states until Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of Godey's Lady's Book, decided to do something about it. For more than 30 years she wrote letters to the governors and presidents asking them to make Thanksgiving Day a national holiday.”

“Finally, in 1863, President Lincoln issued a White House proclamation calling on the ‘whole American people’ wherever they lived to unite ‘with one heart and one voice’ in observing a special day of thanksgiving. Setting apart the last Thursday of November for the purpose, the President urged prayers in the churches and in the homes to ‘implore the interposition of the almighty had to heal the wounds of the nations and to restore it...to full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and union.’ He also states that they express heartfelt thanks for the ‘blessing of fruitful fields and healthful skies.’”

(Taken from http://www.rumela.com/events/events_november_thanksgiving.htm)

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In Part I of his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote: “Thank God, who has made you for so exalted an end. Lord, you have made me to the end that that I forever may enjoy your immeasurable glory. When shall I be worthy of it, when shall I bless you as I ought? Marvel at God’s goodness. How good my God has been in my behalf! How good indeed! Lord, how rich is your heart in mercy and how generous in good will! My soul, let us always recall the many graces God has shown to us...”

Thanksgiving Day – or any day, for that matter – provides us with the opportunity “to recall the many graces God has shown to us.” In a spirit of humility. Let us count our many blessings; in a spirit of generosity, let us share our many blessings with others.

Spirituality Matters 2011: November 28th - December 3rd

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(November 28, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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In today’s Gospel Jesus is amazed not only by another person’s depth of faith; but he is also amazed at the person who demonstrates such faith – a foreigner. And not just any old foreigner, but a powerful one: a Roman centurion who, for all his power, truly knows his place.

In a sermon for Lent during the last year of his life, Francis de Sales remarked: “Certainly the greatest defect we have in our prayers – and in all that happens to us, particularly in that which concerns tribulations – is our lack of confidence.” (Living Jesus, p. 105)

We see no lack of confidence on the part of the centurion in today’s Gospel. As a man who gives – and takes – orders for a living, he knows that the willingness to follow orders can make the difference between life and death, between success and failure, between victory and defeat. He approaches Jesus with the belief that Jesus can effect the miracle for which he seeks by simply giving the order. The soldier’s confidence is so strong that he is prepared to take Jesus’ word on it.

In the midst of our concerns and tribulations, how confident are we in the promise of Jesus’ power? How willing are we to take Jesus at his word?

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(November 29, Advent Weekday)

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“Justice will flourish in his time and fullness of peace forever.”

Justice is defined: “The quality of being just, impartial, or fair.” *Today is God’s time - each hour, each moment is God’s time. Therefore, we who are God’s people are challenged to do our part to make justice flourish in God’s time through our attempts to be “just, impartial and fair” in our relationships with one another. In other words, to give people their due, and in the process, to help bring about the peace for which we so deeply long.*

In the mind of St. Francis de Sales, our zeal for doing what is just can be demonstrated in three (3) ways: (1) “by carrying out great acts of justice to repel evil;” (2) “by doing acts of great virtue in order to give good example by suggesting remedies for evil and exhorting others to apply them, and then doing the good opposed to the evil we wish to eradicate,” and; (3) “in suffering and enduring many things in order to avert evil.” (TLG, 10: 16, 188)

If we want peace tomorrow we must work for justice today. How far are we willing to go to our zeal for justice real and tangible in God’s time...in our time...today?

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(November 30, 2011: Saint Andrew, Apostle)

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“How can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach...?”

St. Francis de Sales once remarked that many people would be only too happy to hear – and follow – God’s Word if God would simply speak to them directly. In other words, they’d prefer that God would ‘cut out the middleman.’ Such folks are destined to be deeply disappointed, noted the Gentleman Saint, insofar as God clearly chooses – most days – to use ordinary people, events and circumstances as ‘middlemen’ for speaking his word to others.

Ordinary people like you and me.

There are some people who would never have heard the power and promise of the Gospel without the preaching of the Apostle Andrew in his day. Likewise, there may be some folks who may not hear the power and promise of the Gospel without our efforts to preach it in our day.

By our words, to be sure, but more importantly – and convincingly – by our actions, in imitation of the greatest ‘middleman’ who ever lived.

Jesus Christ.

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(December 1, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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“Everyone who listens to these words of mine – and acts on them – will be like a wise man who built his house on rock...”

In today's Gospel Jesus outlines the two things required for establishing a firm foundation upon which to build our lives: (1) the willingness to listen to his words, and (2) the willingness to act on them. Obviously, we're wasting our time if we merely listen to God's words without acting on them. Francis de Sales suggests that listening to God's words without doing something with them may be nothing more than supreme cowardice: saying, in effect, 'let somebody else do it.' Perhaps not so obvious, however, is the need to really listen to God's words before we run off and do something about them lest we fool ourselves into thinking that we are doing God's will when we are, in truth, merely doing our own will. In that case, Francis de Sales suggests that acting without listening may be nothing more than supreme arrogance: saying, in effect, 'I'll take it from here.'

Mind you, Jesus warns us that our efforts to both listen to – and act upon – Jesus' words will not shield us from adversity in life; however, Jesus promises that he will give us the strength and confidence we need to face, endure and to overcome adversity...as we see so clearly in his own life.

Listening to Jesus' words and acting on Jesus' words: 'how firm a foundation,' indeed!

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(December 2, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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"Let it be done according to your faith."

Do you have a favorite 'miracle' from the life and ministry of Jesus? Close your eyes for a moment or two and picture it in your mind. (*Homilist: maybe ask for a few examples from the floor...*)

Regardless of which one you might have chosen, did you ever notice how many of these miracles begin with someone asking for help? Did you ever wonder how many miracles Jesus might never have performed if someone hadn't first asked for something from him?

Perhaps every miracle (in reverse order) is made up of two parts: (1) the power that is unleashed when Jesus grants a request from someone, and (2) the power that is unleashed when someone makes a request of Jesus. Think about it: how many times does the experience of a miracle end with the words 'Your faith has been your salvation...'? When Jesus puts the starting point of a miracle back upon the person who asked for his help in the first place, is he merely being polite or self-deprecating, or is he being profoundly honest?

What is Jesus trying to tell them - what is Jesus trying to tell us - about miracles?

Some people claim that God doesn't perform many miracles these days, not exactly new territory, if you think about it. Recall the example nearly two thousand years ago of a village in which (we are told) Jesus himself could perform no miracles because of the inhabitants' lack of faith, i.e., because of their refusal to ask for help.

Did you ever stop to think that perhaps the reason that miracles have stopped in our time is that because we've stopped asking for them?

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(December 3, 2011: Saint Francis Xavier, Priest)

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Today we celebrate the life and legacy of St. Francis Xavier, a disciple of St. Ignatius of Loyola who devoted himself to a life of charitable work as a member of the Society of Jesus. From 1541 until 1552 he evangelized in India and Japan, where many of the inhabitants embraced the faith.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote: "[The Japanese complained to the Blessed Francis](#)

Xavier, their apostle, that the God who had such great care for other nations seemed to have forgotten their ancestors, since God had not granted them knowledge of himself, for lack of which they must have been lost. This man of God told them that the divine natural law is engraved in the hearts of all mortal men, and if their ancestors had observed it, the light of heaven would undoubtedly have enlightened them, just as on the contrary if they had violated it, they deserved damnation. An apostolic answer from an apostolic man..." (TLG 4: 5, 214)

One could raise the question: "Why does God do things the hard way? Why does God wait (from an earthly point of view) for fifteen hundred years before sending someone to preach the Gospel to the people of Japan? Why doesn't God just save everybody everywhere all at once?" Well, as God knows from the experience of his Son, we human beings live within the constraints of time and space: who we are, what we are and where we are impacts what we do, where we do it, when we do it, how we do it and with whom we do it. As we see in the life of Jesus himself, God apparently prefers to change the lives of people not all at once, but one person at a time...in God's own time.

Upon further review we begin to realize that God doesn't make his implicit (natural) love explicit (Incarnational) the hard way: God does it in a personal way, which, in truth, is the most human way of doing anything. In a time and place of his choosing, God invited Francis Xavier to personally evangelize the people of Japan. In this time and place, how might God be inviting us to evangelize the people of our day?

Personally, one person at a time?

Spirituality Matters 2011: December 5th - December 10th

(December 5, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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"Strengthen the hands that are feeble; make firm the knees that are weak. Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not!"

Don't bother looking around the room at other people's hands or knees for weakness. We need look no further than our own hands and knees or, for that matter, than our own minds or hearts, our own spirits or psyche's to see the weakness to which the Prophet Isaiah refers in our first reading today.

This isn't bad news. In fact, it's very Good News; for "the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God" works best when strengthening the weak, reassuring the frightened and shoring up the feeble. Put another way, our weaknesses are not an obstacle to God's transforming, empowering and inspiring love. In fact, our weaknesses are an entrée that that transforming, empowering and inspiring love. As the Preface for the Eucharistic Prayer for Martyrs reminds us, "God chooses the weak and makes them strong in bearing witness to him..."

I'm reminded of Francis de Sales' teaching on who should approach, celebrate and receive the Eucharist. In his [Introduction to the Devout Life](#). He wrote: "Two classes of people should communicate frequently: the strong lest they become weak, and the weak that they may become strong; the sick that they may be restored to health, and the healthy lest they fall sick. Tell them that for your part you are imperfect, weak and sick and need to communicate frequently with him who is your perfection and strength..." (Part II, Chapter 21)

Seen with the eyes of faith, all which is feeble and weak in us is no cause for shame; in fact, seen with the eyes of God, all which is feeble and weak in us can be strong means of our salvation.

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(December 6, 2011: Saint Nicholas, Bishop)

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The first “Die Hard” movie premiered in 1988. Thieves presenting themselves as terrorists occupy an office building in Los Angeles on Christmas Eve with an eye to stealing negotiable ‘bearer bonds’ worth tens of millions of dollars locked inside a high-tech vault. Hans Gruber (played by Alan Rickman) asks a member of his crew (Theo) about his progress in breaking through the vault’s multiple layers of security:

Hans: *Theo, are we on schedule?*

Theo: *One more to go and then it’s up to you, and you’d better be right ‘cause it looks like this last one’s gonna take a miracle.*

Hans: *It’s Christmas, Theo. It’s a time of miracles. So, be of good cheer...*

A common word used for miracle in the New Testament can also be translated “sign.” Other words used to connote a miracle are “marvel” or “wonder.” Regardless of the word that’s used, we understand miracles to be divine displays of power intended to grab our attention.

Because of the many miracles attributed through the intercession of St. Nicholas, he earned the moniker “Nicholas the Wonderworker.” Legend also has it that he secretly distributed gifts to those in need. Through the passage of time many Christian cultures have woven together the Advent season and the Solemnity of the Incarnation with the legend of St. Nicholas and the practice of gift-giving.

As we prepare to celebrate one of the greatest miracles, signs wonders and marvels of all – the Word-Made-Flesh – let us be on the lookout for the countless opportunities that each day presents us – and with God’s help and inspiration – to perform ordinary, everyday miracles, signs, marvels and wonders of God’s love in the lives of others.

Simple things like – oh, I don’t know – like being of good cheer.

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(December 7, 2011: Saint Ambrose, Bishop & Doctor of the Church)

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In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“The great Apostle not only says that charity gives us patience, kindness, constancy and simplicity, but he says that ‘charity is patient, is kind’ is constant. Charity is the property of the supreme virtues in both men and angels to be able to not only command inferior virtues to work but also to do what they command others...Hence St. Thomas Aquinas, in view of St. Paul’s assurance that charity is patient, kind and strong, says: ‘Charity does and accomplishes the work of all the virtues. St. Ambrose calls patience and the other virtues ‘members of charity...’” (TLG 11, 8 p. 218)

Charity – that is, the love of God – can accomplish many good things in us. Charity – that is, the love of God – can help us to accomplish many good things in our relationships with others.

Namely, the love of neighbor.

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(December 8, 2011: The Immaculate Conception BVM)

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In order to fully appreciate the Church's teaching on the Immaculate Conception – that Mary was preserved from the effects of Original Sin from the moment of her conception – Francis de Sales placed it within the larger context, that is, God's plan of salvation.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis wrote: "God displays in a marvelous manner the incomprehensible riches of His power in the vast array of things that we see in nature, but God also displays the infinite treasures of His goodness in an even more magnificent way in the unparalleled variety of goods that we recognize in grace. In a holy excess of mercy, God is not content solely with granting to his people, that is, to the human race, a general or universal redemption whereby everyone can be saved. God has diversified redemption in many ways so that while God's generosity shines forth in all this variety, the variety itself in turn adds beauty to his generosity."

"First and above all, God destined for his most holy Mother a favor worthy of the love of a Son who, since he is all-wise, all-powerful, and all-good, necessarily prepared a Mother in keeping with himself. Therefore, God willed that his redemption be applied to her in the form of a remedy that would keep her safe, so that the sin which spreads sown from generation to generation would not reach her. As a result, she was redeemed in a surprising way. At the appointed time the torrent of original sin began to roll its fatal waves over the conception of this holy woman (with the same impetuous strength it had exerted at the conception of all Adam's other daughters): then, when the torrent had reached that point, it did not pass beyond it but stopped...In this way, God turned all captivity away from his glorious Mother. To her God gave the blessing of the two states of human nature: she possessed that innocence which the first Adam had lost, and she surpassingly enjoyed that redemption which the second Adam gained for her. Hence, like a chosen garden that was to bear the fruit of life, she was made the flower of every kind of perfection." (Book II, Chapter 6)

How was this freedom from the effects of sin displayed in the life of this singularly redeemed woman? Everything that she experienced in life "was used holily and faithfully in the service of holy love for the exercise of the other virtues which, for the most part, cannot be practiced except amid difficulty, opposition, and contradiction...The glorious Virgin experienced all human miseries (except such that directly tend to sin) but she used them most profitably for the exercise and increase of the holy virtues of fortitude, temperance, justice, and prudence, and of poverty, humility, patience and compassion. Therefore, such things did not hinder heavenly love but on many occasions assisted and strengthened it by continual exercise and advance." (Treatise on the Love of God, Book VII, Chapter 14)

Whether sinner or sinless, we all have one thing in common: we are called to embrace each day as fully as possible with its countless opportunities to practice "fortitude, temperance, justice, prudence, poverty, humility, patience and compassion." In this we not only experience the freedom of God's redemption, but also we can more freely be instruments of God's redemption in the lives of others.

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(December 9, 2011: Advent Weekday – St. Juan Diego)

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"You're damned if you do; you're damned if you don't."

That pretty much sums up the message in today's Gospel selection from Matthew. John the Baptizer got criticized for his being aloof and austere; Jesus got criticized for being a down-to-earth man of the people.

There's just no pleasing some people.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Does anyone fail to see that the world is an unjust judge, gracious and well-disposed to its own children but rigorous towards the children of God? We can never please the world unless we lose ourselves together with it. It is so demanding that it can’t be satisfied. ‘John came neither eating or drinking, says the Savior, and you say, ‘He has a devil.’ ‘The Son of Man came eating and drinking,’ and you say he is ‘a Samaritan.’ If we are ready to laugh, play cards or dance with the world in order to please it, it will be scandalized at us, and if we don’t, it will accuse us of hypocrisy or melancholy...” (IDL IV, Ch. 1, p. 236)

You know the old adage: if you try to please everyone, you end up making yourself miserable. On any given day follow the example of both John and Jesus: be who you are, and be that as best as you can.

Come what may.

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(December 10, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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In the Gospel selection today, both Jesus’ disciples and Jesus himself invoke the name of Elijah. One of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament, some of the highlights of his life and legacy cited in the Scripture include:

- Elijah is first mentioned in 1 Kings 17:1 as delivering a message from the Lord to King Ahab – “As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, Whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”
- After completing the message to Ahab, Elijah went, according to God's direction, to “the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.” (1 Kings 17:5-6)
- When the prophesied drought dried up the brook, God sent him to live with a widow in Zarephath of Sidon, where he remained for over two years. During his time there, he miraculously provided a food supply during the famine, and raised her son, who had succumbed to an illness, back from the dead. (1 Kings 17:7-24). The time was apparently used by Elijah to study and prepare for his mission.
- During the third year of the drought, the Lord sent Elijah back to appear before Ahab. The series of events that followed ended with a confrontation on Mount Carmel between Elijah and hundreds of pagan prophets of Baal and Asherah. The supernatural demonstration of the powers of the true God against the powerless frauds led the people to abandon their idolatry and turn back to the Lord (1 Kings 18:1-40). The end of the punishing drought then immediately followed (1 Kings 18:41-46).
- After Jezebel discovered that all of her beloved pagan priests of Baal had been killed in the confrontation with Elijah, she attempted to have him killed (1 Kings 19:1-13). Elijah fled south to [Beersheba](#) where he hid in despair (1 Kings 19:3-5). An angel appeared to him twice for strength, and brought him food (1 Kings 19:5-8). He then journeyed for 40 days to Horeb, where God Himself appeared to him (1 Kings 19:9-18). The Lord then sent Elijah back north to Damascus to anoint Hazael king over Syria, and Jehu king over Israel (1 Kings 19:15-18). It was during that journey that Elijah found and commissioned his successor, Elisha as directed by God (1 Kings 19:16-21).
- One of the most controversial events of Elijah's life occurred at the end of his ministry when he was transported away on a “chariot of fire” (2 Kings 2:11). Elisha was then promoted from being Elijah's assistant, to Elijah's successor (2 Kings 2:15).
- Elijah was a type of [John the Baptist](#) in manner and appearance. John was the Elijah that “must first come” (Matthew 11:11, 14), the forerunner of The Savior as prophesied by Malachi (Malachi 4:5).
- Elijah appeared with Moses in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13)
- James spoke of Elijah as an example of the power of prayer (James (5:17)).

(Taken from Daily Bible Study @ <http://www.keyway.ca/htm2002/elijah.htm>)

Regardless of any question regarding the special person who would come before Jesus to announce the inauguration of his mission in his day, there is no question of who it is who comes after Jesus to continue his mission in our day.

Ordinary people like you and like me!

Spirituality Matters 2011: December 12th - December 17th

(December 12, 2011: Our Lady of Guadalupe in the USA)

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“You are the highest honor of our race...”

“Today’s celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe marks the appearance of Mary to Juan Diego, a sixteenth-century Mexican peasant. The famous and familiar painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe found on Juan Diego’s cloak reflects the image of the Mother of Salvation in the reading from Revelation: a woman is clothed with the sun’ the moon is under her feet’ she is crowned with the stars...” (Liturgical Press, Loose-Leaf Lectionary for Mass, p. 1618)

There are so many reasons why we hail Mary as “the highest honor of our race...” One of the reasons that Francis de Sales cites is her embodiment of the virtues in the midst of all the vicissitudes of life. He wrote:

“In her room at Nazareth she shows her modesty in that she is afraid, her candor in wanting to be instructed and in asking a question, her submission, her humility in calling herself a handmaid. Look at her in Bethlehem: she live simply and in poverty, she listens to the shepherds as though they were learned doctors. Look at her in the company of the kings: she makes no long speeches. Look at her during the time of her purification: she goes to the temple in order to conform to custom. In going to Egypt and returning she is simply obeying Joseph. When she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth she does not consider that she is wasting time doing such a loving act of courtesy. She looks at our Lord not only in joy but in tears. She has compassion on the poverty and confusion of those who invited her to the wedding, meeting their needs. She is at the foot of the cross, full of humility, lowliness, virtue, never drawing any attention to herself in the exercise of these qualities...” (Stopp, Selected Letters, p. 159)

Mary shows us that the highest honor that we can achieve in life is by living our lives in ways that give honor to God. While we may not be clothed in the sun or have the moon under our feet or be crowned with the stars, we are like Mary in this respect: the ‘Almighty has done great things for us,’ too!

How can our souls proclaim the greatness of the Lord today?

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(December 13, 2011: Saint Lucy, Virgin and martyr)

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“The Lord hears the cry of the poor...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Love the poor and love poverty, for it is by such love that you become truly poor. As the Scripture says, we become like the things we love. Love makes lovers equal. ‘Who is weak and I am not weak?’ says St. Paul and

he might have also said, ‘Who is poor and I am not poor with him?’ for love made him like those he loved. If you love the poor you will share their poverty and be poor like them. If you love the poor be often with them. Be glad to see them in your own home and to visit with them in theirs. Be glad to talk to them and be pleased to have them near you in church, on the street and elsewhere. Be poor when in conversing with them and speak to them as their companions do, but be rich in assisting them by sharing some of your abundant goods with them.” (IDL Part III, Chapter 15, p. 165)

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Of course, the Lord doesn’t merely ‘hear’ the cry of the poor, but the Lord does something about it, too. Whoever ‘the poor’ may be in our lives – and ‘the poor’ may present themselves to us on any given day – we, like God, must be willing to hear their cry and their call for help.

And, like God, we too, must be willing to do something about it...by ‘sharing some of our more abundant goods’ with them.

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(December 14, 2011: Saint John of the Cross, Priest and Doctor of the Church)

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“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed the deaf hear, the dead are raised...”

These words are Jesus’ answer to the question, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” Of course, Jesus’ words are not mere words: they describe the actions that Jesus is performing, the miracles he is working and the healings that he is effecting on a remarkable level.

How would we answer the question: “Does the love of God dwell within you, or should we look somewhere else?” Of course, the most powerful answer wouldn’t come in the form of words; rather, the convincing answer would come from our actions: namely, from the practice of virtue. Francis de Sales wrote: “Let us try sincerely, humbly and devoutly to acquire those little virtues whose conquest our Savior has set forth as the goal of our care and labor. Such are patience, meekness, self-mortification, humility, obedience, poverty, chastity, tenderness toward our neighbors, bearing with their imperfections, diligence and holy fervor.” (IDL, Part III, Chapter 2, p. 127)

What kinds of simple, everyday signs might we perform today as signs that “the one who is to come” continues to come to us, each and every day?

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(December 15, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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“I will praise you Lord, for you have rescued me.”

God has indeed rescued us; rescued us in so many ways. We might not think about it much, but the most fundamental way in which God has rescued us is by creating us – each and every one of us - out of love for us. Francis de Sales wrote:

“Consider that a certain number of years ago you were not yet in the world and that your present being was truly nothing. My soul, where were we at that time? The world had already existed for a long time, but of us there was yet nothing.”

“God has drawn us out of that nothingness to make us what we are now and God has done so solely out of his own goodness...”

“Consider the nature God has given to us. It is the highest in this visible world; it is capable of eternal life and of being perfectly united to his Divine Majesty.” (IDL, I, Chapter 9, p. 53)

It would be enough to praise God for having rescued us from nothingness; so much the more should we praise God for the lives God has given us: lives capable of being united forever with Him in this world, and in the world to come.

How can we praise the Lord today?

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(December 16, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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“Observe what is right; do what is just.”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales exhorted:

“Be just and equitable in all your actions. Always put yourself in your neighbor’s place and put your neighbor in yours: then you will judge rightly. Imagine yourself the seller when you buy and the buyer when you sell: you will sell and buy justly. We lose nothing by living generously, nobly, courteously and with a royal, just and reasonable heart. Resolve to examine your heart often to see if it such toward your neighbor as you would like your neighbor’s to be toward you were you in your neighbor’s place. This is the touchstone of true reason.” (IDL III, Chapter 36, p. 217)

As sons and daughters of God, we are made in God’s image and likeness. We are to judge – and live – by God’s standards, i.e., to do what is right and just. May this same God give us the grace we need to live “generously, nobly, courteously and with royal, just and reasonable hearts.”

How well are we living by God’s standards in our relationships with one another?

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(December 17, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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Today’s selection from the Gospel of Matthew – the “Genealogy of Jesus Christ” – is a literal “Who’s Who” of the Old Testament. It is a record of the key players – some well-known, others quite obscure – who from the person of Abraham played their parts – however small, however great – in the litany of relationships bridging the centuries that led to the appearance of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

A closer look at these *dramatis personae* who came before Christ reveal quite of collection of just about every personality type you can imagine, from saints to sinners and pretty much everything else in between. God certainly seems to use some very unworthy/unsavory people as instruments of his loving Providence!

Francis de Sales certainly appreciated this reality. With the exception of the next-to-last person named in the genealogy (Mary), he remarked in a sermon about the ‘saints:’

“In all other creatures, no matter who they are, some imperfections can be found. The man who denies that he has any imperfections is a just as much a liar as the man who claims that he has no imperfections at all. Every person, however holy, has some imperfections; every person, however wicked, has some good points. Made in God’s image, each person reflects something of God’s goodness; made from nothing, every person likewise always carries some imperfections.” (Pulpit and Pew, p. 258)

While the genealogy tells us a lot about Jesus’ ancestors, it tells us a great deal more about how God employs

perfectly imperfect and imperfectly perfect people to play a personal role in God's plan of creation, redemption and inspiration. And yet, the genealogy does not end with Jesus. It continues with Jesus' perfect/imperfect brothers and sisters who have come after him some two thousand years later!

People like us!

Spirituality Matters 2011: December 19th - December 24th

(December 19, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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"Now you will be speechless and unable to talk...because you did not believe my words."

Poor Zechariah!!! You can hardly blame the guy for having a follow-up question for Gabriel in the wake of the latter's pronouncement that Zechariah and his wife will have a son, and not just any old son at that, but one who will embody the spirit and power of Elijah! All Zechariah wanted to know was how this is supposed to happen to a couple who are apparently pretty advanced in years.

For raising the question, Gabriel renders Zechariah mute until his pronouncement comes to pass.

Meanwhile, earlier in the same Gospel – the same chapter of the same Gospel, for that matter – when Mary asks a question of Gabriel concerning his prediction that she will be the mother of the Messiah, Mary receives no rebuke.

Look at the parallels: the angel Gabriel appears to both Mary and Zechariah; both Mary and Zechariah are troubled by their respective annunciations; both ask for some clarification around the annunciation (i.e., *"How will this happen?"*); both receive additional information and assurances, but it is only Zechariah who seems to incur the angel's displeasure, and he suffers accordingly. (Of course, all this changes later when Zechariah indicates that his son is to be named "John.")

The difference seems to be indicated by Gabriel himself. He criticizes Zechariah not for questioning him, but for not believing him! In the case of Zechariah, it appears that his question was less a question and more a statement of disbelief, whereas Mary's question was an expression of overwhelming wonderment and awe.

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

"When God gives us faith, God enters into our soul and speaks to our mind. He does this not by way of discussion but by inspiration. So pleasantly does God propose to the intellect what it must believe that the will thereby receives such great complacency that it incites the intellect to the truth and acquiesce in it without any doubt or opposition whatsoever..." (TLG, Book II, Chapter 14, p. 138.)

In the end, things worked out well for both Mary and Zechariah: each acquiesced to the manifestation of God's will in their lives, albeit at a different pace and with a different pattern! Each played pivotal roles in God's plan of salvation. While both questions and disbelief can serve as means of increasing our faith in their own unique ways, perhaps Gabriel's underlying message is simply this: don't allow your legitimate questions to rob you of your faith and trust in God's love for you...or your ability to say "yes" to that love with trust and with faith.

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(December 20, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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“Ask for a sign from the Lord your God...”

Who wouldn't jump at the chance of making such a request of God? Who wouldn't say "yes" to the opportunity for God to display His power for us and/or for someone whom we love? Yet, in today's selection from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Ahaz balks when given the opportunity of a lifetime: he takes a pass. He backs away, saying, "I will not tempt the Lord."

What's up with that? Perhaps Ahaz's reluctance is rooted in his intuition that signs from the Lord often require changes in the one who asks for the sign in the first place! Under those circumstances, his circumspection makes a whole lot more sense. Remember the admonition? "Be careful what you pray for..."

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Devout discussions and arguments, miracles and other helps in Christ's religion do indeed make it supremely credible and knowable, but faith alone makes it believed and known. It brings us to love the beauty of its truth and to believe the truth of its beauty by the sweetness it diffuses throughout our will and the certitude it gives to our intellect. The Jews saw our Lord's miracles (signs) and heard his marvelous doctrines, but since they were not disposed to accept the faith, that is, since their wills were not susceptible to the sweet and gentle faith because of the bitterness and malice with which they were filled, they remained in their infidelity. They saw the force of the proof but they did not relish its sweet conclusion...” (TLG, II, Chapter 14, pp. 139 – 140)

As people of faith, we should feel free enough to ask God for signs; however, we must be prepared to consider - and follow - the directions in which those signs may challenge us to go.

And change!!!

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(December 21, 2011: Advent Weekday – St. Peter Canisius, Priest, Doctor of the Church)

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Why reinvent the wheel when you don't have to? Why start from scratch when it isn't necessary?

We might say this of St. Francis de Sales himself as today we celebrate the life and legacy of St. Peter Canisius, SJ, a Dutchman and contemporary of the "Gentleman Saint" who became a prominent force as a missionary in Counter-Reformation Germany.

In defending the Church's teaching on Purgatory against the critique of John Calvin, Francis de Sales remarked:

“It is a beautiful thing - and one full of consolation - to see the perfect correspondence which the present Church has with the ancient, particularly in belief. Let us mention what makes to our purpose concerning Purgatory. All the ancient fathers believed in it and have testified that it was of the Apostolic faith. Here are the authors we have for it...It would have been easy for me to bring forward their testimonies, which are accurately collected in the books of our Catholics: of Canisius, in his *Catechism*; of Sanders *On the Visible Monarchy*; of Genebrand in his *Chronology*; of Bellarmine in his *Controversy on Purgatory*; of Stapleton in his *Promptuary*. But particularly let those who would see at length and faithfully quoted the passages of the ancient Fathers, take up the work of Canisius...” (The Catholic Controversy, pp. 378 – 379)

The point? Wisdom isn't about knowing everything yourself. Wisdom is about knowing where to find that which you need to know...from the work already done by others.

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(December 22, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord...”

In a sermon on Our Lady’s Presentation, Francis de Sales remarked:

“No one ever gave themselves so perfectly or so absolutely to the Divine Majesty as Mary did. She was more perfectly obedient to the Word of God than any other creature. Moreover, she was more submissive than anyone else ever was. The one who gives all reserves nothing. But what, I ask you, does it mean to give all to God? It is not to reserve for oneself anything which may not be for God, not even one affection or desire. And what does God ask of us? Listen, I beg you, to this Sacred Savior of our souls: ‘Give me your heart.’ (Prov. 23; 26) He keeps repeating this to us.”

“But you will ask me, how can I give God my heart, so full of sins and imperfections? How could it be pleasing to Him since it is filled with disobedience to His wishes? Alas, poor soul, why afflict yourself so? Why do you refuse to give it to Him such as it is? Do you not know that he did not say, ‘Give me a pure heart like that of the Angels or of Our Lady,’ but, ‘Give me your heart?’ He asks for your own heart. Give it to Him such as it is...” (Living Jesus, pp. 224 – 225)

Mary’s soul – perfect as it was – rejoiced in the greatness of the Lord. Finding her fulfillment in the love of God, she found her fulfillment in giving back to God everything that God’s love had made given in the first place. So, too, with us. Our souls – imperfect as they are – are no less capable of proclaiming the greatness of the Lord if we, too, are willing to give to God – without reserve - everything that God’s love has likewise given to us in the first place.

In what does God’s greatness consist? That God wants all of who we are...warts, and all!

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(December 23, 2011: Advent Weekday – St. John of Kanty, Priest)

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“Lift up your heads and see: your redemption is near at hand...”

In his Treatise on the Love of God, Francis de Sales wrote:

“God displays in a marvelous manner the incomprehensible riches of his power in the vast array of things that we see in nature, but he causes the infinite treasures of his goodness to show forth in an even more magnificent way in the unparalleled variety that we see in grace. In a holy excess of mercy, God is not content in solely with granting to his people, that is, to the human race, a general or universal redemption whereby everyone can be saved. God has diversified redemption in many ways, so that while God’s generosity shines forth in all this variety, the variety itself, in turn, adds beauty to his generosity...” TLG, II, Chapter 6, p. 116)

What a powerful statement: God’s redemption is not generic; it is not ‘one-size-fits-all.’ God redeems us personally; God redeems us individually; God redeems us by name. In the next-to-last chapter of his Treatise, Francis remarked: “Consider how Jesus took on the task of redeeming us by his death, ‘even to death upon a cross.’ The Savior’s soul knew each of us by name and surname...” (XII, Ch. 121, p. 280)

So, when we say pray the words of the psalmist, “your” redemption means *your* redemption: not someone else’s, not the redemption of the person to your right or left, not the salvation of folks before or behind you.

Yours!!

So, lift up your head; lift up your heart! See your redemption near at hand...a redemption – a gift – that is crafted specifically for you....out of love for you, for the same God who redeems you by name created you by name.

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(December 24, 2011: Advent Weekday)

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“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he has come to his people and set them free...”

On the subject of freedom – of liberty – Francis de Sales wrote:

“Our free will is never as free as when it is a slave to God’s will, just as it is never as servile as when it serves our own will. It never has so much life as when it dies to self, and never so much death as when it lives to itself. We have the liberty to do good and evil, but to choose evil is not to use but to abuse this liberty. Let us renounce such wretched liberty and subject forever our free will to the rule of heavenly love. Let us become slaves to dilection, whose serfs are happier than kings. If our souls should ever will to use their liberty against our resolutions to serve God eternally and without reserve, Oh, then, for love of God, let us sacrifice our free will and make it die to itself so that it may live in God! A man who out of self-love wishes to keep his freedom in this world shall lose it in the next world, and he who shall lose it in this world for the love of God shall keep it for that same love in the next world. He who keeps his liberty in this world shall find it a serf and a slave in the other world, whereas he who makes it serve the cross in this world shall have it free in the other world: for there, when he is absorbed in enjoyment of God’s goodness, his liberty will be converted into love and love into liberty, a liberty infinitely sweet. Without effort, without pain, and without any struggle we shall unchangingly and forever love the Creator and Savior of our souls. (Treatise 12: 10, pp- 277-278)

One of the greatest gifts that God gives us is freedom. But in the Salesian tradition, freedom is not about merely having the power to do either good or bad; freedom is not simply the ability to do right or to do wrong. Salesian liberty – the gift of divine freedom – is the power to be our best selves; to be good people; to do good things...in imitation of the image and likeness of God’s Son and our Brother, Jesus Christ. Francis de Sales observed: “The first thing we ask of God (in the Lord’s Prayer) is that God’s name be hallowed, that his kingdom may come and that his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. What else can this be but the spirit of liberty?”

How can we practice this heavenly freedom in our relationships with each other on this earth? Francis de sales noted: “In all other things which are neither commanded nor forbidden, let each one abound in one’s own sense: that is, let each person enjoy and use one’s liberty, without judging or interfering with others who do not do as one does, or trying to persuade others that one’s ways are the best.” (Conferences I: p. 13)

Let us be who we are, and be that in perfect freedom. Let us give others the freedom they need to do the same.

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(December 24, 2011: Vigil of the Nativity)

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“Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about...”

In a Christmas sermon, Francis de Sales remarked:

“What else have we to say except that the mystery of Our Lord’s Nativity is also the mystery of the Visitation. Just as the most holy Virgin was to visit her cousin Elizabeth, we, too, must go very often to visit the Divine Babe lying in the manger. There we shall learn from the sovereign Pastor of shepherds to direct, to govern and

to put our flocks in order in such a way that they will be pleasing to His goodness. But as the shepherds doubtless did not go to Him without bringing Him some little lambs, we must not go there empty-handed, either. We must bring Him something. What can we bring to this Divine Shepherd more pleasing than the little lamb which is our love and which is the principal part of our spiritual flock? For love is the first. This special gift is the grace which helps us to attain what would otherwise be impossible for us: the joy and happiness of glory. Thus, in the darkness of the night Our Lord was born and appeared to us as an infant lying in a manger...” (Sermons for Advent and Christmas, p. 53)

What better gift to bring to the manger than to place our love at the service of God and one another? Oh, come, let us adore.....and experience a foretaste of the joy and happiness of glory!

Spirituality Matters 2011: December 26th - December 31st

(December 26, 2011: Saint Stephen, First Martyr)

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“You will be hated because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved...”

The day after we celebrate the birth of the Messiah, the day after we celebrate the gift of the Incarnation, the day after we celebrate the coming of Emmanuel, God-who-is-with-us, the day after we ponder the miracle of the Word-made-Flesh, we remember the ultimate sacrifice of the first martyr, Stephen. A stark contrast, indeed, to the idyllic images of a newborn babe, of a manger, of barn animals, of shepherds and of choirs of angels.

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote: “Look at the example given by the saints in every walk of life. There is nothing that they have not done in order to love God and be God’s devoted followers. See the martyrs, unconquerable in determination. What torments they suffered to keep their resolutions...” (IDL, V, Chapter 12, p. 284)

The deacon Stephen was “working great wonders and signs among the people.” He was simply being faithful to God’s will for him: he wasn’t looking for a fight. But when others decided to bring the fight to Stephen, he didn’t duck it: he stood his ground in giving witness to the power and promise of the Lord, Jesus Christ. He endured to the end, an end that came almost immediately.

We share two things with Stephen: (1) we are called to give witness to the power and promise of the Lord Jesus in our own lives; (2) we are challenged to endure to the end. As Francis de Sales tells us in so many places throughout his writings, ‘martyrdom’ will not come for most of us in the form of ‘enduring to the end’ of an unexpectedly-shortened life; rather, we are called to bear witness by ‘enduring to the end’ a long, perhaps unexpectedly-exhausting life.

Either way, may God give us the strength to hold our ground in bearing witness to God whenever, wherever and however God may choose!!

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(December 27, 2011: Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist)

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In his introduction to Francis de Sales’ Conferences, N. Cardinal Wiseman wrote the following about St. John, Apostle and Evangelist:

“He could speak nothing else but love. If he writes a Gospel, love diffuses a golden glow over it, totally different from any other: it is the Gospel of love. If he writes a long epistle to the universal Church, or a short

letter to a lady and her children, it must be on love; and we know that he spoke ever on this topic, till the thoughts and words of his long life gradually distilled and condensed, at last, in the feebleness of his frame and organs, concentrated themselves into the one sentence, which, Sunday after Sunday, formed his only sermon; till, by its monotony, it wearied his hearers, but cannot weary the Church of ages: ‘My little children, love one another.’ Such is the spirit of St. John...” (Conferences, page xli)

The Apostle whom Jesus loved was, in his own life, consumed with and by love. Jesus also loves each of us: How can we be said to be consumed with and by that same love?

In what ways do we share in the spirit of St. John?

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(December 28, 2011: The Holy Innocents, Martyrs)

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In his Conference on *Constancy*, a sermon for the Octave of Holy Innocents, Francis de Sales remarked:

“We are keeping the Octave of the Feast of the Holy Innocents on which day holy Church makes us read the Gospel which describes how the Angel of the Lord told the glorious St. Joseph in a dream – that is to say when he was sleeping – that he must take the Child and the Mother and flee to Egypt, since Herod, jealous of his royalty, and fearing that he would take it away, was seeking Our Lord to put Him to death. Full of wrath because the three Kings had not returned to him in Jerusalem, he had commanded that all the little children under the age of two be put to death, and hoping by that means to ensure the possession of his Kingdom...” (Conferences, page 29)

We probably don’t think about this often, but consider the irony: in order to avoid Herod’s wrath against all children under the age of two, the Angel commands that Joseph take Mary and Jesus to Egypt. Talk about possibly jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire! Egypt! Sworn enemy of the Jews! This is the place to which Joseph is told to flee and take refuge! Someone of lesser faith might have said to the Angel: “No thanks. I’ll take my chances here...”

So, too, with us. How many times in our lives do we find ourselves being asked to take uncertain risks in order to avoid a certain one? How many times in our lives do we wonder if the would-be solution to one problem has the potential of creating other problems of its own? Joseph placed his trust in God. By taking a risk, he did the right thing. How might God ask us this day to take the risks involved in doing the right thing?

How would we respond?

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(December 29, 2011: St. Thomas Becket, Bishop)

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“*The way we may be sure that we know Jesus is to keep his commandments...*”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“You must be ready to suffer many great afflictions for our Lord, even martyrdom itself. Resolve to give Him whatever you hold dearest it is please Him to take it...However, as long as divine Providence does not send you great, piercing afflictions...bear patiently the slight injuries, the little afflictions, the inconsequential losses that daily come to you...” (IDL, III, Chapter 35, p. 213)

To know Jesus is – among other things – to keep His commandments. We know from our own experience that keeping His commandments does not come easily – or cheaply – in the give and take of daily life. The life and

legacy of St. Thomas Becket provides the ultimate example of this: he was murdered because of his resolve to “suffer many great afflictions” for the Lord, even – in his case – martyrdom itself.

You’ve heard the saying: “There’s no such thing as minor surgery to the person who is having it.” While it is unlikely that our attempts to keep God’s commandments will lead to the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom, our efforts will nonetheless come at a cost. May God give us the grace to “bear patiently the slight injuries, the little afflictions, the inconsequential losses that daily come” to us.

And live in the consolation and strength that we do – in truth – know Jesus.

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(December 30, 2011: The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph)

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Today’s selection from the Book of Sirach certainly shares in the spirit of the Fourth Commandment: “Honor your mother and father.” The reading is telling us that our relationships with others - especially those with whom we share so much time and contact every day - are the primary expression of the disposition of our hearts, minds, affections and attitudes.

The selection from the Letter to the Colossians confronts us with the gift - and the challenge - of creating that “space” we call “family,” a space in which we first learn something of what it means to be sons and daughters of God. As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, we must clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Insofar as a holy life is not the same as a stress-free or trouble-free life (just look at the life, especially the very early life, of Jesus, Mary and Joseph), we all need to practice these virtues all the time with the hope of establishing, maintaining and strengthening family, especially - God forbid - when we ruffle, distract or disappoint one another.

Francis de Sales calls us to live a life of devotion in ways that fit the demands and responsibilities of the state and stage of life in which we find ourselves. What is a devout life? It is nothing more complicated (but more demanding) than doing what is right in the eyes of God, and in relation to one another, carefully, frequently and diligently. It is precisely in the vocation in which we find ourselves, especially in those roles so basic as mother, father, brother, sister, wife, husband, son or daughter that we must practice the devout life.

Francis de Sales tells us: *“The little, unattractive and hardly noticeable virtues which are required of us in our household, our place of work, among friends, with strangers, any time and all the time, these are the virtues for us.”* (Introduction, Part III, Chapter 2). Of course, the most important practice is that of love, that which not only reconciles, but also purifies and, dare we say, even glorifies the best of human relationships. It is only in relationship with one another that the practice of the little, everyday virtues flowers into love, not only helping to create a better life here on earth, but also providing a foretaste of the eternal life promised to us in heaven.

As we celebrate the Feast of The Holy Family we realize that we actually know very little about the day-to-day give-and-take of the relationships among Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Family life – a hidden life – is a way of life that requires both science and art. Considering Jesus’ fidelity to - and consistency in - his pursuit of justice, peace, reconciliation and freedom, we can certainly sense where Jesus first acquired as a child so many of the skills he would later practice in his adult life.

After all, charity, peace, justice, forgiveness - like so many things - begin at home.

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(December 31, 2011: Saint Sylvester, Pope)

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“Every lie is an alien to the truth...”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis de Sales wrote:

“Your language should be restrained, frank, sincere, candid, unaffected and honest. Be on guard against equivocation, ambiguity or dissimulation. While it is not always advisable to say all that is true, it is never permissible to speak against the truth. You must become accustomed never to tell a deliberate lie whether to excuse yourself or for some other purpose, remembering always that God is the ‘God of truth.’ If you happen to tell a lie inadvertently, correct it immediately by an explanation or by making amends. An honest explanation always has more grace and force to excuse us than a lie has...” (III, Chapter 30, p. 206)

Being a follower of Jesus calls us to be honest, to be transparent, to be guileless. May God give us the grace not only refrain to from lies but may God also give us the grace to live in the truth, and so to be recognized as sons and daughters of the “God of truth.”