

## FEAST OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

Homily

Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM

24 January 2022

Texts: Eph 3:8-12; John 15:9-17

Today we celebrate the Memorial of St. Francis de Sales, a most interesting man who lived in very challenging times. He was born on August 21, 1567 at the Chateau de Sales in Savoy into a very prominent family on both sides. He had servants and private tutors accompanying him and after learning in prestigious schools, he went to Paris where he studied rhetoric and the humanities at the Jesuit school there. While his father wanted him to study law and marry well, Francis experienced a spiritual crisis in Paris which made him physically and mentally ill. He recovered and experienced the grace of being loved completely by God. He went to a church in the Latin Quarter, prayed the Memorare, dedicated his life to Mary, and made a vow of chastity with a desire to be ordained a priest.

Francis then went to Padua where he completed studies in law and theology at the University, receiving a doctorate in 1592. He returned to Savoy where his father lined up privileged positions in the government, and also a wealthy noble heiress for him to marry. But Francis said *no* to this, and finally his father consented to his becoming a priest. He was ordained in 1593, became well known for his preaching, his gift for spiritual direction, and his relentless service to the poor. By 1602, at age 35, he was consecrated as Bishop of Geneva and then his life became extremely challenging because of the times.

There was widespread corruption in the Church of Rome with Bishops being secular princes and Popes marrying and bearing children, even many times illegitimately. They practiced nepotism, ordaining male relatives without call or training to be Bishop-Princes in dioceses in the extensive Papal States over which they had civic control. As well, the construction of the Basilica of St. Peter's led to selling indulgences to increase revenue to pay for it.

Martin Luther, a well-trained Augustinian monk theologian living in Saxony, disgusted with this horrific abuse of power, published treatises on faith alone and not works, on scripture alone and not papal authority, and on the church belonging to all believers, not just Popes and Bishops and Priests. Soon after, John Calvin in Geneva began preaching an even more radical reform than Luther's. Calvin affirmed that God *only* is Sovereign and predestines only *some* people to be saved; that there are only two sacraments in scripture, baptism and the Eucharist, and the latter is not changed into the actual body and blood of Christ but rather remains bread and wine; and having icons, statues, candles, elaborate vestments, incense, and music in churches are idolatrous practices.

Francis de Sales was appointed Bishop of Geneva, but he could not reside there because Calvin was quick in gaining converts and the city was controlled completely by

them. And so, de Sales lived in the city of Annecy some twenty miles from Geneva where he quietly and persistently grounded his life *completely* in the love of God in Christ, focusing it completely on what Jesus proclaims in the scriptures. Francis preached clearly and briefly; he gifted people in spiritual direction, especially those experiencing scruples, anxiety, and rigidity; he wrote small treatises explaining the Christian faith simply and how God loves *all* people, not just clergy, with unconditional love. In time, his sermons and teachings were collected into a book called *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Its final edition was published in 1619 just before his death from a stroke in 1622.

Let me share with you a few quotes from this book:

On Devotion:

*In so far as divine love beautifies our souls and makes us pleasing to God, it is called grace; in so far as it gives us strength to do good, it is called charity. But when it reaches such a degree of perfection, that it makes us not only do the good, but do so carefully, frequently and readily, then it is called devotion.*

*... devotion is simply a spiritual activity and liveliness by means of which Divine Love works in us and causes us to work briskly and lovingly.... It also excites us to be ready and loving in performing as many good works as possible, even such as are not enjoined upon us, but are only matters of counsel or inspiration.*

On Us:

*Be who you are and be that well.... Don't lose your inner peace for anything whatsoever, even if your whole world seems upset.*

*Be patient with everyone, but above all with yourself. I mean do not be disheartened by your imperfections, but always rise up with fresh courage.*

*If you would fall into any extreme, let it be on the side of gentleness. The human mind is so constructed that it resists rigor and yields to softness.... There is nothing as strong as tenderness and nothing as tender as true strength.... gentleness, temperance, modesty, and humility are graces which ought to color everything we do.*

Francis knew well the texts we have proclaimed this morning. He came out of his darkness as a young man in Paris by being graced *exuberantly* with a sense of *how much* God loved him. God befriended him in this early religious experience and “told him everything”, as the Gospel of John proclaims today. He preached and taught and healed as Jesus and Paul did, manifesting the wisdom of God in the Church as the *whole people of God*.

We too live in very trying times. Our church is scarred by some clergy committing male and female sexual abuse and hidden by certain bishops; by financial scandals in Rome and in dioceses around the world; and by teaching and practicing patriarchy, homophobia, and racism. Our society is split by climate change deniers, by egregious attempts at voting rights violations, by Covid, by interfaith shootings and threats, and by extreme poverty, war and famine.

What inspiration shall we draw from Francis de Sales, truly a saint for our times as well, who rooted himself fully in prayer to let the love of God *flow into* him, *transform* him, and then act courageously and tenderly, “doing the good ... *carefully, frequently and readily*” Let us too so love and do!