

CONSOLING THOUGHTS
of
ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

—THIRD BOOK—

Consoling Thoughts on Sickness and Death



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Consoling Thoughts on Sickness and Death

*Gathered from His Writings,
And Arranged in Order, by the*

REV. PÈRE HUGUET

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

27TH EDITION

*“You cannot read anything more useful than the works of
St. Francis de Sales, in which everything is pleasing
and consoling.”—Fenelon*

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ST. FRANCIS DE SALES' LOVING HEART

“Through a great part of my soul I am poor and weak, but I have a boundless and almost immutable affection for those who favor me with their friendship. Whoever challenges me in the contest of friendship must be very determined, for I spare no effort. There is no person in the world who has a heart more tender and affectionate towards his friends than I, or one who feels a separation more acutely.”
—St. Francis de Sales.

“It has pleased God to make my heart thus. I wish to love this dear neighbor ever so much—ever so much I wish to love him! Oh! When shall we be all melted away in meekness and charity towards our neighbor! I have given him my whole person, my means, my affections, that they may serve him in all his wants.”—St. Francis de Sales.

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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

ST. FRANCIS de Sales was a man of great passion. Reading his thought is to know his heart. Has Holy Mother Church ever reared a child so willing and able to express his longing for perfect union with God? Has a man so learned ever presented Truth and Beauty so simply?

Words cannot fully express the Publisher's appreciation for this Gentle Saint, the Bishop of Geneva and Doctor of the Church. Saint Francis was a lawyer, a theologian, and a missionary. As a young priest, he volunteered to re-evangelize the Calvinist of Chablais, France. He preached not only with conviction, but also with unparalleled gentleness and grace. He worked tirelessly, even under the cover of night, slipping his apologetic writings beneath the doors of anti-Catholics. The Lord rewarded him with one of the most remarkable and well-documented events in Catholic history when nearly the entire population of 72,000 Calvinists returned to the Faith.

This volume, *Consoling Thoughts*, is representative of why St. Francis was so well-received in Chablais, and

indeed, throughout history. Perhaps more than any other saint, St. Francis preached truth with love. His teachings, his works, and his very presence were consoling to those 72,000 lost souls of Chablais and to millions of more over the centuries. Now, then, it is our hope that they will offer consolation to a new generation of Catholics.

It is for this reason that TAN Books is proud to bring this compilation of St. Francis' writings back to print. Initially published in a single volume, we now present this work in a four volume series, carefully arranged by topic to give solace in times of darkness, or, simply in times of deep meditation.

It is the Publisher's sincere hope that *Consoling Thoughts* finds a permanent home in your library and among our long list of Saint Francis de Sales classics, including *Introduction to the Devout Life*, *Treatise on the Love of God*, *Catholic Controversies*, and *Sermons of St. Francis de Sales* (in four volumes).

Saint Francis de Sales, Doctor of the Church, *Pray For Us.*

ROBERT M. GALLAGHER, PUBLISHER
November 19, 2012

PREFACE TO THE SIXTH FRENCH EDITION

By Père Huguet

SIX editions of this little work, published in a short time, tell better than any words of ours the popularity which St. Francis de Sales enjoys amongst us. Many sick and wounded souls have found in these sweet and affecting pages a heavenly consolation.

Encouraged by this success, the honor of which belongs to God and His blessed servant, we have again with pen in hand run through the works of the Bishop of Geneva, to glean carefully whatever had escaped us on our former tour. Nor has our labor been in vain; we have gathered new flowers, whose beauty and perfume yield in no respect to the first.¹ To introduce them in this edition, we have been obliged to lop off a good many of the old chapters which were so well suited to the object of the book. We have acted thus with the less regret as we have published the omitted

¹ The author has scarcely taken anything from the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, this admirable book being in the hands of everyone.

portions, complete, in two other volumes: the *Consoling Piety of St. Francis de Sales*, and the *Month of Immaculate Mary, by St. Francis de Sales*. These two works form a complete course of consolation for all the trials of life.

We may be permitted to give a short extract from a late number of the *Catholic Bibliography*, which contained an article on *Consoling Thoughts*. The idea of publishing the article was most remote from our mind, on account of the many marks of very great kindness towards us which it bears; but remembering that the merit of this work belongs entirely to St. Francis de Sales, we have felt impelled to give at least an extract, as a new and encouraging proof of the opportuneness of our little book.

“The very title of the book,” it says “pleases, and should secure a large number of readers. How many souls are there today who stand in need of being encouraged and consoled? Want of confidence is the great obstacle in the work of the Christian apostleship. Discouragement is the evil of our period, because in general the Christian life, or SANCTITY, appears like a sharp mountain, which only few persons can ascend; in despair of arriving at its summit the majority of men remain below on the plains. The mere word ‘sanctity’ frightens. The *Lives of the Saints*, which ought to encourage, often discourage, by their list of heroic virtues; we gladly conclude that such a state of perfection is suited only to a very small number, and we remain out of the ways of sanctity for fear of not being able to walk in them.

“Blessed then be the pious author who has received the happy inspiration of assembling together the *Consoling Thoughts of St. Francis de Sales*, the sweetest and most

amiable of the saints, and one of the greatest masters of the spiritual life!

“It is especially by his admirable union of firmness and mildness that St. Francis de Sales shines in the first rank of ascetic writers. Who else ever painted virtue under lovelier colors, or made it easier or more practicable? Whoever knew better how to enlighten and bring back souls that had withdrawn from God, or that wearied themselves in His service by an unreasonable fear?

“Happy then and useful inspiration [it was], to gather from his works the thoughts most fitted to enlighten pious and timorous souls, to console them, and to dilate their hearts dried up by fear! Father Huguet has given us, in this little work, the quintessence of everything that our amiable saint wrote most sweet and consoling, especially in his letters, in which that heart so good and tender, which God had formed to comfort the afflicted, is entirely revealed. The book is of the greatest assistance to the simple faithful, and to directors and confessors charged with comforting discouraged and troubled souls.

“A word now as to the method adopted. The author read, he tells us, with pen in hand, the works of the holy Bishop of Geneva; and, after noting the different passages which referred to the same subject, he arranged them in such order as to form a single chapter. A page is thus sometimes collected from seven or eight places in the saint’s writings. Yet such is the connection of ideas that we scarcely perceive the labor, and everything seems to flow as from one fountainhead. As to the graceful, artless style of St. Francis de Sales, the author has lightly retouched it in

some places, changing a few antiquated expressions that would be little intelligible nowadays. Without altering anything in substance, he has considered it a duty to suppress certain details and comparisons, whose want of simplicity, a common fault at present, might cloy the work. Everywhere we have the good shepherd, who, after the example of his Divine Master, instructs, cheers, and consoles, by the help of parables and similitudes, in the great art of using which perhaps he never had an equal.

“To add more clearness and authority to the book, the author has, from time to time, placed at the foot of the page some notes taken from the most esteemed writings of our greatest masters of the spiritual life, particularly Bossuet and Fenelon. These notes, happily selected, give a new value to the work. Should we now recommend it to all those whose souls have need to be encouraged and consoled—in a word, all the faithful?”

INTRODUCTION

By Père Huguet

“The writings of St. Francis de Sales are the fruit of grace and experience.”—Fenelon

THE great evil of our period is discouragement. Tempers and characters have become weak and degenerate.

Everyone agrees in saying that the most common obstacle, and the one most difficult to be overcome, which all those meet who labor for the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of pious souls, is want of confidence. The great evil that Jansenism wrought in the midst of us has not yet entirely disappeared: many still believe that perfection consists only in fearing the Lord and in trembling before Him, who, in His mercy, permits us to call Him *Our Father*, and to name Him *the good God*.

The generality of authors have placed in the *Lives of the Saints* an account of their heroic virtues only, without a single word of the defects and miseries which God left in them, in order to preserve them in humility and to

make them more indulgent towards their brethren; yet the history of their weaknesses would, according to the judicious remark of St. Francis de Sales, have done the greatest good to a large number of souls, who imagine that sanctity can, and should, be exempt, even in this world, from all alloy and all imperfection. It is to remedy, as far as lies in our power, these inconveniences, that we have gathered together, under appropriate headings, from the writings of the sweetest and most amiable of all the saints, those passages which are best calculated to enlighten pious souls, and to expand their hearts withered with fear.

The writings of St. Francis de Sales are admirably suited to times of trial and sadness. The soul enjoys in them an atmosphere of mild salubrity that strengthens and renews it. The doctrine there is holy and profound, under a most amiable exterior; the style adds, by its simple naïveté, to the charm of a clear and ingenuous fancy; we are instructed while we imagine ourselves distracted, and admire while we smile.

We hesitate not to say that no saint has ever contributed so much as St. Francis de Sales, by his immortal writings, to make piety loved and practiced in all classes of society.

“Under his pen,” says the best of his biographers, “devotion is noble, true and rational; courtesy of manners, a spirit of sociality, all the charms of a well-ordered piety, form its cortege, if we may use the expression, and yet it is not disguised in order to appear the more agreeable. Everywhere the author’s sweetness appears without weakness, and his firmness without bitterness. He teaches us to

respect decorum, which he calls the gracefulness of virtue, to rise above nature without destroying it, to fly little by little towards Heaven like doves when we cannot soar thither like eagles, that is to say, to sanctify ourselves by ordinary means. There the mind contemplates truth, unveiled in majestic splendor, bedecked with maxims equally elegant and profound, clad in a style noble, flowing and natural, relieved by the justness of the expressions, sometimes fine and delicate, sometimes vivid and impressive, always graceful and varied: this is simplicity, with all the merit of beauty, for every idea is rendered by the proper word, and every word embellishes the thought. There, above all, the heart tastes an inexpressible pleasure; because the sweetness of the sentiment always seasons the precept, while the delicacy of the precaution that accompanies it secures its acceptance, and the artless candor and goodness of the author, who paints himself without intending it, make him beloved; at the same time the soul, embalmed in what it reads, deliciously participates in the sweetest and purest perfume of true piety.”¹

The style of St. Francis de Sales is a picture of his heart as much as of his mind: we feel that he loves and deserves to be loved, but that he wishes above all things that we should love God.

A special characteristic of St. Francis de Sales is that the frequent use he makes of figures and the comparisons which he endlessly multiplies, never weary. This style

¹ *Life of St. Francis de Sales*, by M. the Curé of Saint Sulpice. This beautiful work has met with a success which surprises no one except its author, whose modesty and evangelical simplicity can alone equal his learning and his zeal for the conversion of souls.

would be clumsy in another author; with our saint it is a new pleasure, which draws away the reader and attracts him every moment, as a gentle magnet, and this with so much the more ease as the reader does not perceive it. One is led along unresistingly, yielding with pleasure to the charms of this enchanting style. An effect, so rare and wonderful, is owing not only to our saint's judicious choice of figures and comparisons, but also to his amiable character, to the sprightliness of his sentiments, and to the transports of his love for God, which burst forth even in the midst of the most abstract truths. He cannot contain the fire that consumes him; he allows it to escape by every sense. Moreover, he so well unites simplicity of diction with beauty of metaphor, that, in perusing his works, we feel the ornaments to flow from his pen without an effort on his part to seek them. A tender and compassionate soul, he is full of charity towards his friends. Let us hear him speak: "Through a great part of my soul I am poor and weak, but I have a boundless and almost immutable affection for those who favor me with their friendship. Whoever challenges me in the contest of friendship must be very determined, for I spare no effort. There is no person in the world who has a heart more tender and affectionate towards his friends than I, or one who feels a separation more acutely."

We have so often heard the following affecting words repeated, that they seem to have fallen from the mouth of the sweet Saviour Himself: "It has pleased God to make my heart thus. I wish to love this dear neighbor ever so much—ever so much I wish to love him! Oh, when shall

we be all melted away in meekness and charity towards our neighbor! I have given him my whole person, my means, my affections, that they may serve him in all his wants.”

This benignity, this gentleness, which breathed through the whole conduct of our saint, made St. Vincent de Paul exclaim with touching simplicity: “O my God! How good must Thou be, since the Bishop of Geneva is so good!”

It is in his works that he deposited the richest treasures of this sweet sensibility and of this playful imagination, which enabled him to lend to the driest subjects and the severest precepts of the evangelic law a charm that makes them loved even by the profane.

The French Academy proposed the writings of St. Francis de Sales as a model to all, even at a time when it extolled the faults of Corneille.

To make himself all to all, St. Francis de Sales descends to the level of the simple faithful, and there he loves to rest. Sometimes he places himself with his *Philothea* in the midst of the stormy sea of the world, and there casts out the anchor of faith; again, he takes his stand on the high road to show to the multitude, who pass indifferent and distracted along, the narrow way that leads to Heaven. We might say that he smoothes its roughness, so carefully does he conceal it under flowers. These are not deceitful flowers, by which virtue is disfigured in the endeavor to render it more attractive; they are those flowers of the soul which perfume without corrupting it, secret joys, interior consolations, ineffable delights, the anticipated inheritance of God's elect upon earth. The picture which he draws of devotion can only be compared to that of charity by

St. Paul. "In his writings," says Père de Tournemine, "we have the morality of the Sacred Scriptures and the Holy Fathers reduced to true principles and practical rules."

The doctrine of St. Francis de Sales is like a beautiful river which takes its rise in pure and elevated regions, and which, descending to the lowlands, spreads wide its banks, in order to reflect a broader expanse of Heaven; it is decked with the flowers of the prairie which it gathers on its course, and carries to the sea a tribute only of limpid and perfumed waters.

According to St. Francis de Sales, we must not be too punctilious in the practice of virtues, but approach them honestly, with liberty, in a *grosso modo* way. "Walk simply in the way of the Lord," he says, "and do not torment your mind. We must hate our defects, but with a tranquil and quiet hatred—not with a spiteful and troubled hatred—and, if necessary, have patience to witness them and to turn them to account by a holy self-abasement. For want of this, my daughter, your imperfections, which you view so closely, trouble you much, and by this means are retained, there being nothing that better preserves our defects than fretfulness and anxiety to remove them." (*Sermon for the Feast of St. Magdalen*).

He applies to himself what he counsels to others: "I know what sort of a being I am; yet even though I feel myself miserable, I am not troubled at it; nay, I am sometimes joyful at it, considering that I am a truly fit object for the mercy of God, to which I continually recommend you."

This devotion, at least in appearance so easy, naturally

pleases persons of the world, who, like the Count Bussy-Rabutin, say: "I merely wish to get into Heaven, and no higher." This nobleman, writing in another place, says: "Save us with our good Francis de Sales; he conducted people to Heaven by beautiful ways." Yet these beautiful ways were no other than the narrow way of which the Gospel speaks; only our amiable saint knew how to smooth its entrance and to hide its thorns under flowers.

St. Francis particularly excelled in comforting the afflicted and the sick; a few words falling from his heart sufficed to calm and enlighten them; his words entered into their soul as an oil of great sweetness, which moderated the heat of their malady. Let us hear him console a pious person to whom sickness was an insupportable burden: "Be not annoyed to remain in bed without meditation, for to endure the scourges of Our Lord is no less a good than to meditate. No, indeed; but it is much better to be on the cross with Jesus Christ, than merely to contemplate Him in prayer." To another, who was troubled at the sight of her miseries, he said: "When we happen to fall, let us cast down our heart before God, to say to Him, in a spirit of confidence and humility, 'Mercy, Lord! For I am weak.' Let us arise in peace, unite again the thread of our affections, and continue our work."

St. Francis de Sales was so much the better qualified to tranquilize and encourage souls inclined to diffidence and depression, as he had himself been obliged to pass through the severest trials, and arrived at the possession of peace of heart only by a total abandonment to God. "Since at every season of life, early or late, in youth or in old age, I

can expect my salvation from the pure goodness and mercy of God alone, it is much better to cast myself from this moment into the arms of His clemency than to wait till another time. The greater part of the journey is over; let the Lord do with me according to His will; my fate is in His hands; let Him dispose of me according to His good pleasure.”

The pious M. Olier, that great master of the spiritual life, very much esteemed St. Francis de Sales. “God,” he says, “wishing to raise him up as a torch in the midst of His Church to enlighten an immense number, replenished him with the most marvelous gifts of understanding, knowledge, and wisdom, proportioned to His designs. As for his knowledge, it was evidently more than human, and the effect of the Divine Spirit.”

If you wish to know Francis de Sales thoroughly, to be initiated into the most secret mysteries of that vast understanding and that perfect heart, read and re-read his *Letters*, in which every subject, from the most humble to the most sublime, from a simple how-do-you-do to a description of ecstasies and eternal beatitudes, is treated of in the style that best suits it. Read, above all, the *Letters to Madame de Chantal*, and those which treat of the *direction of souls*. Considering these admirable letters, Bossuet says: “Francis de Sales is truly sublime; there is no one among moderns with such sweetness, who has a hand so steady and experienced as his, to elevate souls to perfection and to detach them from themselves.” The letter written after the death of his mother is of a primitive simplicity, and a sublime model of Christian resignation; we imagine that we hear

St. Augustine weeping over St. Monica, and the tears it makes us shed have nothing of bitterness, so sweet is the death of the just when thus related.

The learned and pious Archbishop of Cambray continually recommended the perusal of our saint's writings. "You cannot read anything more useful," says Fenelon, "than the books of St. Francis de Sales; everything there is consoling and pleasing, though he does not say a word but to help us to die. His artless style displays an amiable simplicity, which is above all, the flourishes of the profane writer. You see a man who, with great penetration and a perfect clearness of mind to judge of the reality of things, and to know the human heart, desires only to speak as a good-natured friend, to console, to solace, to enlighten, to perfect his neighbor. No person was better acquainted than he with the highest perfection; but he repeated himself for the little, and never disdained anything, however small. He made himself all to all, not to please all, but to gain all, and to gain them to Jesus Christ, not to himself."

To this judgment of the pious Bishop of Cambray we shall add that of the learned Bourdaloue: "The doctrine of St. Francis de Sales is a food, not of earth, but of Heaven, which, from the same substance, nourishes, like the manna, all kinds of persons; and I am able to say, without offending against the respect which I owe to all other writers, that after the Holy Scriptures there are no works that have better maintained piety among the faithful than those of this holy bishop."

The illustrious Monsignore of Paris shared the same

sentiments. "All that can contribute," he says, "to make the most amiable of saints better known to the world must be useful to the cause of our holy religion."

Thus, the three men who were the glory of the clergy of France in the age of Louis XIV were unanimous in esteeming and praising the works of this great master of the spiritual life.

Protestants themselves are obliged to render justice to the exceptional merit of the works of St. Francis de Sales. One of their best authors² thus appreciates the writings of the blessed Bishop of Geneva: "From its first appearance, the *Introduction to a Devout Life* had a universal success in France, and editions succeeded one another rapidly. This was an event of great consequence in regard to such a book, and Catholicism could most justly rejoice at it. The learned controversies of Bellarmine had been of far less advantage: they had indeed fitted for theological discussion a clergy who found themselves face to face with superior forces; but from the first blow, the *Introduction* could make conquests to a religion whose practices were presented under forms so amiable, and even so delightful. . . . Among Calvinistic gentlemen solicited to abjure their faith, the little book served as an occasion for more than one renunciation. In this respect, the *Introduction to a Devout Life* was, in the beginning of the century, what the *Exposition of the Catholic Faith* was in the middle, and had effects quite similar. Of all that St. Francis de Sales has written, his *Letters* are the most widely spread: Protestants read them after a

2 *History of French Literature*, by M. Sayous.

selection, for all would not suit their taste; but in each class, the amiable and glowing piety, the grace—what shall I say? The wit, the familiar gossip, with which the Bishop allows his pen to twirl along, have a singular charm; and never does the afflicted or dejected heart disdain the consolation and encouragement which it finds in perusing them.”

It is in his correspondence that we must study the great, the holy Bishop of Geneva; there we shall find humility unparalleled, a joyous cordiality, peace unutterable, the sole desire of accomplishing the will of God.

There we shall find that elegance, ever new, in thought and in expression; that richness of beautiful images and of fine comparisons borrowed from things most familiar: the rose, the pigeon, the halcyon, the bee, the odorous plants of Arabia; that dovelike simplicity, that childlike candor which does not, however, exclude, on due occasions, a manly strength and energy; that chaste tenderness which could only come from Heaven; that gentle meekness which holds the key of every heart.

We shall be the less surprised at the eulogies given to the writings of St. Francis de Sales by the most experienced doctors and the most eminent personages, when we consider with what maturity and wisdom they were composed. Those beautiful pages, which seem to flow as from a well, so free and natural are the doctrine and the style, are the fruit of the most serious study and the most assiduous meditation, joined with a great knowledge of the human heart, which he had acquired in the direction of souls.³

3 *Spirit of St. Francis de Sales.*

His beautiful *Treatise on the Love of God* is the result of twenty-four years' preaching, according to the statement of the author himself, and the fruit of such profound study, that there are fourteen lines in it, which, as he told Mgr. Camus, Bishop of Belley, had cost him the reading of more than twelve hundred pages in folio.⁴ After this, we should not be surprised at the unexampled success which has crowned the writings of St. Francis de Sales. The *Treatise on the Love of God* is a most beautiful book, and one that has had a great circulation. All the agitations, all the inconsistencies of the human heart are painted in it with inimitable art. We behold there the exercises of love, contemplation, the repose of the soul in God, its languors, its transports, its dereliction, its dying sadness, its return to courage, the abandonment of the docile spirit to the secret ways of Providence. When the *Introduction to a Devout Life* appeared in the world, it created an extraordinary sensation; everyone wished to procure it, to read it, and, having read it, to read it again. Very soon it was translated into nearly all the languages of Europe, and editions succeeded one another so rapidly that in 1656 it had reached the fortieth. Henry IV, on reading it, declared that the work far surpassed his expectations; Mary of Medici, his wife, sent it bound in diamonds and precious stones to James, King of England; and this monarch, one of the most learned who ever occupied a throne, conceived such an esteem for it, that, notwithstanding his schismatical and spiteful preju-

⁴ It is related that the publisher, in gratitude for the considerable gain he had derived from the sale of the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, made a journey to Annecy expressly to offer as a gift to the author a sum of four hundred crowns of gold. (*Memoirs of the Academic Society of Savoy*, Vol. II).

dices against Catholic writers, he carried it always about with him and often read it. Many times he was heard to say: "Oh, how I should wish to know the author! He is certainly a great man, and among all our bishops there is not one capable of writing in this manner, which breathes of Heaven and the angels." The general of the Feuillants, speaking of this work, calls it the most perfect book that mortal hand ever composed, a book that one would always wish to read again after having read it many times, and he adds this beautiful eulogium, that in reading it he who would not be a Christian should become better, and he who would be better should become perfect.⁵

The Church, directed by the Holy Spirit, exhorts all her children to be guided by the counsels of St. Francis de Sales. *Admonished by his directions*, she says in his Office. She assures us that his works have diffused a bright light amongst the faithful, to whom they point out a way as sure as it is easy, to arrive at perfection.

We could, if our design permitted it, multiply evidence in favor of the works of St. Francis de Sales. We shall terminate this introduction by some extracts from a letter of Pope Alexander VII, one of the greatest of his panegyrists: "I conjure you anew to make the works of M. de Sales your delight and your dearest study. I have read them I cannot tell how many times, and I would not dispense myself from reading them again; they never lose the charm of novelty; they always seem to me to say something more than they had said before. If you trust me, these writings should be

5 *Life of St. Francis de Sales*, by M. the Abbé Hamon.

the mirror of your life, and the rule by which to form your every action and your every thought. As for me, I confess to you that from often reading them I have become like a repository of his most beautiful sentiments and the principal points of his doctrine, that I ruminate over them at my leisure, that I taste them, and that I make them, so to speak, pass into my very blood and substance. Such is my opinion of this great saint, exhorting you with all my heart to follow him.”

If in gathering these lovely flowers and binding them into bunches, we have lessened their beauty or their perfume, we trust that still they will at least a little serve those severely tried souls for whom we intend them; we shall consider it an ample recompense for all our trouble, if, even in a single heart, they increase confidence in God, and the desire to love and serve Him generously.

“Most holy Mother of God, the most lovable, the most loving, and the most loved, of creatures! Prostrate at thy feet, I dedicate and consecrate to thee this little work of love, in honor of the immense greatness of thy love. O Jesus! To whom could I more fitly offer these words of Thy love than to the most amiable heart of the well-beloved of Thy soul?”⁶

6 Dedication of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, by St. Francis de Sales.