

PHILOTHEA *or*  
*An* INTRODUCTION  
*to the* DEVOUT LIFE

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PHILOTHEA *or*  
*An* INTRODUCTION  
*to the* DEVOUT LIFE

SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES  
*Bishop, Confessor and Doctor of the Church*

*With an Introduction by*  
Father John C. Reville, S.J., Ph.D.

*"The parting words of St. Louis, when on his deathbed, to his son, were: 'Make frequent confession, and choose thee a good confessor, who shall faithfully teach thee in the way of salvation.'"*

*—St. Francis de Sales (p. 11)*



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*“But even as Josue and Caleb declared that  
the Land of Promise was good and fair,  
and that the possession of it would be easy and pleasant;  
so the Holy Spirit, speaking by all the Saints,  
and our blessed Lord Himself assure us that  
a devout life is a lovely, a pleasant, and a happy life.”*  
—St. Francis de Sales



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# INTRODUCTION

THE “Introduction à la Vie Dévote,” is here offered plus the title of *Philothea*, the name under which the original French of the work was published, by its author, St. Francis de Sales, in 1608. It first saw the light, just about the time Shakespeare was giving to the world “Antony and Cleopatra,” Captain John Smith his “True Relation,” Middleton “A Mad World.” In the year of its publication John Milton was born and Quebec founded. It is not likely that at any time during his life the saintly Bishop of Geneva ever heard of the plays of the greatest of English poets, nor can we imagine, that, man of taste and lover of letters though he was, he would have much relished the tempest and turbulence of passion as painted by the Elizabethan dramatist. Yet, like Shakespeare, the writer of the *Philothea* was an admirable psychologist and could read and analyze character with unerring instinct. But Shakespeare did not move on the same plane of thought and vision. Francis lived in a world of supernatural ideas, and there is much, we imagine, in the world of the creator of Falstaff and the Merry Wives of Windsor, in the philosophy even of “Hamlet” and the crudities of “Timon of Athens,” that would have shocked him. But long before Shakespeare’s name had met with anything like general recognition, either from his own countrymen, or, more especially from circles abroad, before any foreign translations of his plays existed, “L’Introduction à la Vie Dévote” had been done into almost every language of cultured Europe, and the Saint’s name and work were better

known among Frenchmen and foreigners than those of the Englishman, in Cumberland or Lincolnshire.

The *Philothea* wears well, like all great classics. It is now more than three hundred years old, and though everything has changed around us, the very language in which it was written, the styles, fashions and manners, the politics, the social fabrics of the times, it has still the freshness and vigor of its first youth. For the Saints, who seem to be so cloistered from the world and to look out upon it, as might some holy nun through the iron grille of a Carmelite chapel, with ethereal gaze and as in a waking trance, really understand the world better than the worldling. They unerringly chart its course and accurately take the soundings of its treacherous waters, they plummet its depths far better than those whose bark is tossing on their restlessness. Their vision is clearer, their compass is more accurately set. Hence it is that any really great spiritual book has, of its nature, one of the first qualities required for a world-classic. It deals in truth and power with the vital questions that affect the lives of men, it enters into the sanctuary of the heart, it brings light, the sometimes blinding light of God's truth into the neglected shrine of inner consciousness and sends the echoes of forgotten principles ringing through the awakened soul.

Hence the immortality of such a book as the *Confessions of St. Augustine*. Its author had sounded all the depths and shoals of human pleasure and triumph. The African rhetorician knew the world, he had tasted its emptiness. An honored, petted and rose-garlanded guest, he had sat at its banquet table, amidst wine and song. But, with what Libyan, almost uncontrolled and fiercely burning passion, he bewails his follies and sins, his pride, the world's evil fascination! What lyric raptures over the goodness of a merciful God who saved him from its snares! The author of the *Imitation of Christ*, the Flemish recluse of the fifteenth century, is the very antithesis of St. Augustine. In him, the style, the thought do not pour forth like molten lava from the panting heart. He is uniformly serene, calm, self-poised and he writes like a hermit venturing abroad into the haunts of men, with hands thrust into

the long sleeves of his habit, his head covered with enfolding cowl, with apparently unseeing eyes, with slow and rhythmic step, a hieratic figure of meditation and solitude. But how he too knows the world! How well he reads the heart! What a diagnostician of the maladies of the soul! How gently, yet how ruthlessly he places his finger on the wound, hidden perhaps to ourselves, and with infinite tenderness and the sternness and unflinching sincerity of true love tells us, almost with a smile, as if we were told something we already but too well suspected: "Here, brother, thou ailest. Friend, here thou art dangerously ill. Here—be brave my son—thou shalt have to apply the knife, to cut and to burn, for thy very life is at stake." Wisest of monitors and kindest of friends! What treasures of heavenly lore, yea even of true worldly wisdom hast thou stored in the pages of thy little book.

To the *Imitation* we must add another little volume dear to St. Francis de Sales, and which he is said even to have preferred to it, *The Spiritual Combat* of the Theatine, Lorenzo Scupoli. Nor must we forget *The Sinner's Guide* by the Venerable Louis de Granada, the *Names of Christ* of the Venerable Louis de Leon, nor the drill-book of the soldier of Christ, *The Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius, that made as many Saints, as Francis de Sales used to say, as it contained letters, nor the *Christian Perfection* of Alphonso Rodriguez, the manual on whose solid precepts so many seculars and religious have been trained.

At no time in the history of the Church have masters of the ascetic life failed to point out its principles, its end and the practical methods by which it must be attained. In the very age which saw the germs of wide-spread spiritual decay, in the lives of Catholics, while Voltaire was undermining so many things sacred by his sarcasms and sneer, St. Alphonsus de Liguori was writing those masterpieces of asceticism which still guide thousands in the pursuit of holiness.

The spiritual book, the *Philothea*, now given to our readers is from the pen of one of the greatest men of the seventeenth century in France, and one of the noblest and most lovable Saints in the Church of God. Francis de Sales was born at Thorens in Savoie, August 21, 1567, of a

noble family, illustrious in the annals of his native province. His father and mother brought him up in the strictest principles of the Catholic Faith, the more so, as nearby Geneva, where the family counted many friends, was the central stronghold of Calvinism. The boy had for daily spectacle, and almost for playfellows, the snow-clad Alps, theme of Guiraud's, Byron's and Coleridge's song, ever sublime, ever fascinating, whether the bridal veil of the mists garlands their brows, or their bastions bear the burden of everlasting snows.

The young nobleman's education was that of the youths of his class in the last years of the sixteenth century. His mother taught him his prayers and catechism. He made his first studies near his native place at the college of Annecy in Savoie; later, under the Jesuits in Paris. To the study of rhetoric and philosophy, he added that of theology, Scripture and Hebrew. At the age of twenty, the young man, handsome, cultured, and courtly, the perfect type of the gentleman of his time, went to Italy and heard the lectures of the famous Pancirolo, in the law school of the University of Padua. The world smiled before him, pleasure beckoned him on, the highest honors of the State were dangled before his eyes. He made hosts of friends by his refined manners, his kindly humor, his eloquence, his wit, his unfailing kindness and his all-winning gentleness and sweetness. He made enemies, alas, by his uncompromising fidelity to the principles of his faith, his scorn of all that was base, his loyalty to the standards of honor and purity he had learnt in the ancestral home. His enemies, thinking no doubt they might terrify him from the paths of virtue from which they could not wheedle him, set upon him to cow him into submission. But the gentle Francis de Sales was not to be cowed by threat or blow, and when attacked by a band of assailants he whipped out his rapier and drove his enemies in headlong flight through the tortuous streets of old Padua. Gentle Francis de Sales! Yes, in truth. But he won the right to be so called because he had disciplined a naturally fiery temperament with the curb and bit of Christian self-control.

The degree of Doctor *utriusque juris*, of civil and canon law, crowned

the career of Francis in dreamy Padua. Yielding for the moment to his father's wish, he accepted office before the local Senate of his native province at Chambéry. Twice he refused the senatorial dignity. In 1593 he was named, while still a layman, Provost of the Episcopal Chapter of Geneva, and the same year was ordained priest. His heart was now satisfied.

If ever there was a priestly soul, it was that of Francis de Sales. His life was stainless. His character was balanced. His intellectual gifts were of a high order, his mental vision clear, his fancy playful, his imagination creative, his learning extensive. His love of God burned like a poetic flame; it was tender and childlike; it was the very breath of his apostolate. With an almost feminine tenderness, he loved all men and because he loved them he wished all to know and to love God. But he was strong. In his strength, he was tolerant of men's weaknesses, of their peculiarities, their narrow views, their whims, their oddities, their ill-founded judgments, their inconsistencies and their faults, provided only, these did not essentially interfere with their solemn obligations towards God. He taught that a courtier might be a faithful attendant on his prince and yet serve God; that a woman might keep her social rank and defer to its reasonable demands and conventions, and at the same time preserve the grace of God in her heart.

When he first preached to the mountain villages of the Chablais, his simple popular eloquence, full of parables, homely allusions and illustrations, won all hearts. He spoke to the people and for their needs. They listened to him with rapt attention and heard the "Provost's" sermons with something like amazement. Never had the mountain folk of the Chablais ever suspected even that they could be spoken to in such homely yet truly priestly and dignified phrase. Conversions from Calvinism became numerous and the name of the young apostle was soon known throughout the length and breadth of France.

Francis, although disliking controversy, held several conferences with the Calvinist Théodore de Bèze, but as they seemed to lead nowhere, they were soon abandoned. In 1602 he was appointed Bishop

of Geneva. But the Calvinist capital offered but a cold welcome and limited opportunities for the evangelization of his immediate Catholic flock, and he transferred the main theater of his labors to Annecy, where he lived like any poor priest and where he has left up to this day a lasting and fragrant memory.

His work as Bishop, as founder with St. Jane Frances de Chantal of the Order of the Visitation, his labors as reformer of ecclesiastical discipline in Savoie and in France, his influence at court with Henry IV and his son Louis XIII, his unbounded charity, his zeal for souls, his gentleness and at the same time the heroism which he displayed in the most trying tasks, his unswerving fidelity to the Chair of Peter, his contempt for the honors of the world, his constant refusal to accept from Henry IV and Louis XIII of France far greater honors than the Dukes of Savoie could offer him—all this belongs to the history of the Church in the seventeenth century. They need not be recounted here. But they soon wore out the brave champion of Christ who scaled the snow-clad Alps to seek out his erring sheep. Obedient to the orders of his sovereign, the Duke of Savoie, who had sent him on a confidential mission to Avignon, he stopped on his return at Lyons. There he saw Madame de Chantal, whom he had long directed in the secrets of the spiritual life and led to the heights of sanctity. Worn out by his labors and suffering intense pains, which he bore without a murmur, he here passed away, December 28, 1622. The body of the Saint rests in his beloved Convent of the Visitation at Annecy. The Lyonnese kept his heart in their city for over a century and a half, but at the time of the French Revolution it was carried to Venice, where it is venerated today. Francis was beatified in 1661 and canonized by Pope Alexander VII in 1665. In 1877 he was proclaimed by Pius IX, Doctor of the Universal Church.

Among the Saint's principal works are the *Controversies*, first printed as hand-bills and leaflets and scattered among the inhabitants of the Chablais mountains who either could not or would not come to hear him preach. The Saint was one of the first in modern times to use

this peculiarly twentieth-century publicity device for mission purposes. The *Controversies* form a popular treatise on the fundamental articles of the Catholic Faith. The authority of the Church and the Primacy of Peter are particularly insisted on. "The Defense of the Standard of the Cross" exposes the reasons for the devotion to the Cross and the meaning of the Sign of the Cross; it is a simple exposition of one of the most popular of Catholic practices. *The Treatise on the Love of God* is with the "Philothea" the one masterpiece which fully reflects the mind and heart of the Bishop of Geneva as those of a great genius and a great Saint. The first four of its twelve books explain the theory of Divine Love, its birth, growth, perfection in the soul, and how it may be lost there; the fifth defines what is meant by the love of complacency and the love of benevolence; the sixth and seventh treat of *affective* love; the eighth and ninth of *effective* love, which is naught else but submission and conformity in practice to the will of God. The last three books resume this teaching and suggest practical methods for its application to daily life. If, in the first part of the work, there is a little dryness when the Saint enters into the explanation of the faculties of the soul, as the work proceeds, it rises into the realms of true mystic poetry, and its pages are clothed in language of the purest lyricism, which caused it to be compared by Sainte-Beuve to the finest passages of Lamartine. The *Philothea* (1608) may not in vastness of conception be the equal of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, but it is perhaps better suited to the average reader, and as a spiritual book stands in the very first rank of great religious treatises.

In order that the memory and example of the saintly Bishop of Geneva might be still more honored than in the past, Pope Pius XI, on the occasion of the tercentenary of the Saint's death, issued a special Encyclical Letter, dated January 26, 1923. In that Encyclical *Rerum Omnium*, he solemnly designated St. Francis de Sales, heavenly patron of Catholic writers and journalists. In the course of his Letter the Holy Father refers to the book now edited, the *Philothea* or *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and counsels the men and women of our day to read

its simple, homely, but ennobling lessons. He singles it out with special and whole-hearted approbation, so that we may well call it the chosen "Spiritual Guide of the Holy Father." He is fully aware, no doubt, that it has a special mission in our own times, just as it had in the seventeenth century, and that it can bring, both the priest at the altar and the nun in her cell, the statesman in office, the highborn lady of the world and the humblest handmaid at her work, rich and poor alike to the highest sanctity, provided they follow its golden lessons. "Philothea," as its Greek etymology implies, is the "God-loving" soul, any soul that sincerely wishes to serve its Creator and Lord, in no matter what rank of society, under any circumstances of fortune, in any walk or state of life. The original "Philothea" seems to have been a lady of high rank, Madame de Charmoisy, equally distinguished by birth, fortune and piety, whom the pious Bishop of Geneva had met on one of his visits to Paris and in whom he found an apt pupil in the ways of perfection.

The *Philothea* or *Introduction to the Devout Life* is meant for all Christians. St. Francis himself tells us that too many spiritual authors addressed themselves in their writings to priests only, to religious men and women living under a special rule that obliged them to aim at a higher perfection. These authors did not address the vast majority of their brethren who had no other guide but the Gospel. They had cloistered the principles of sanctity and made asceticism a closed book to them. Yet Our Lord had preached that perfection was meant for all men. He had called all to perfection, that perfection at least which they might attain in their various states of life. "Be ye perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." It is the special merit of the Bishop of Geneva to have opened the too rigidly barred gates of asceticism; to have given asceticism, devotion an open entrance into the court, the camp, the farmhouse, the fashionable salon or parlor, the workshop of the laborer; to have taught with unsurpassed authority, sweetness and charm, that the very height of sanctity and perfection might be attained by any man or woman who, in the fear of God and His Love, fulfills all the duties of the state of life in which his lot has been cast. In



the *Philothea* then, Francis intends to lead the soul living in the world, on the paths of devotion, to true and solid piety. It is an error, a heresy even, says the Saint, to hold, that piety is incompatible with any state of life. In the first part of the book, the Saint helps the soul to divest itself from all affection to sin. In the second, he teaches it how to be united to God by prayer and the use of the Sacraments; in the third he drills it in the practice of virtue. He then strengthens it against temptation, and finally teaches it how to form its resolutions and to persevere. The "Introduction" is a masterpiece of psychology, of practical morality, built upon the solid foundation of the Gospel and the teaching of the Fathers and great ascetical writers.

*Philothea* is addressed, as we have said, to every rank and class of society, to the religious, the priest, the nun, the artisan; to the widow, the mother, the bride. It is written with the directness, the plainness of phrase and allusion, characteristic of the Saints, and which at times might shock an over-fastidious ear. But the holy Bishop looks at life steadily and sees it with the purified vision of a stainless soul. Simple and solid, it is also clothed with that "incommunicable charm" of the great writer, as Newman says, who has something close to his heart and must carry it in its entirety to his readers. It is no wonder that Pius XI singled it out as peculiarly appropriate to the needs of our present society. Few other books teach the lessons of the Gospel with the same authority and charm, and are so eminently practical.

St. Francis is not only a master of the spiritual life, he is a great writer and one of the fountainheads undefiled of the noble French literature of the seventeenth century. He is by his quaintness, simplicity, richness of imagination and originality of thought, by his sprightliness and picturesqueness of phrase, the connecting link between Montaigne and Amyot on the one hand and Fénelon and La Fontaine on the other. There is a winged grace in his words, a twinkle, a joyance, subdued and tender in his eyes, that immediately disarm the most critical reader. His French, like that of La Fontaine, loses its delicate aroma, even in the best translation. His "Letters" remind us of those of St. Teresa. The

curling iron has not given them that too artificial, if graceful Marcel wave sometimes seen in those of Madame de Sévigné; but they are as French in their freedom, simplicity and grace as those of Voltaire, Joseph de Maistre or Louis Veuillot.

“Les grandes pensées viennent du coeur,” wrote the Marquis de Vauvenargues. The heart of the Bishop of Geneva was filled with the love of the beautiful and the true. God for him was Beauty, Truth and Love. The noblest thoughts sprang from the rich soil of his generous nature. He expressed them with the spontaneity of a child. Like a child he loves to talk of marvels and strange beasts, and relying too much on Pliny and old “Bestiaries” he draws many of his illustrations from the “Natural Philosophy” of the Roman writer, and charming though the illustrations be, modern science must reject the foundation on which they rest. He loves to speak of doves and bees, lions, partridges. “Phoenixes, unicorns and salamanders,” says Gamaliel Bradford in his appreciative essay “Portrait of a Saint,” included in his volume, “A Naturalist of Souls,” play a large part in his menagerie, and his botany is too often in a class with Falstaff’s camomile: “Honors, rank, dignities, are like the saffron plant, which the more it is trodden on, the faster it grows.” Yet we read it all with never-failing delight.

Mr. Bradford’s essay reminds us of Leigh Hunt’s delightful essay on the Bishop of Geneva, “The Gentleman Saint.” The title, however, is an unhappy one, for no Saint, whether Simon Stylites or Benedict Joseph Labre, can really deserve the name that does not also possess the essential characteristics of the gentleman even though he might not know all the complexities of modern etiquette. St. Francis de Sales has found no enemies. A Protestant sovereign, James I of England, one of the scholars of his age, said that he wrote more like an angel than a man. Great French critics and *littérateurs*, from Sainte-Beuve to Strowski, Henri Bordeaux and Amédée de Margerie, Lanson, Brunetière and Faguet, linger with delight over the polished yet homely and simple ease of his phrase. Like Samuel Johnson, Francis had his faithful, but fortunately not too prolix Boswell, and in “L’Esprit de Saint François de Sales,” his

friend Camus, Bishop of Belley, painted an intimate portrait of a great servant of God, whose winning smile, tender words, humility, sweetness and charity won countless souls to a newer and fuller understanding of the service of God. Through the *Philothea* St. Francis speaks to the men and women of our own times. Those who will read the book will heartily reëcho the wish of the Holy Father: "Would that this book, the most perfect of its kind in the judgment of his contemporaries, as it was at one time in the hands of all, were now read by all, so that true piety might everywhere flourish again, and the Church of God might rejoice in seeing sanctity common among her sons."

JOHN C. REVILLE, S.J.



# PART FIRST

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*Counsels and Exercises for the  
Guidance of the Soul from Its First Desire  
after a Devout Life unto a  
Full Resolution of Pursuing the Same*





## CHAPTER ONE

### *True Devotion Described*

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YOU aim at true devotion, my dear Philothea, because, as a Christian, you know how acceptable it is to the Divine Majesty. But inasmuch as trifling errors at the outset of any undertaking are wont to increase rapidly as we advance, frequently becoming almost irreparable, it is needful that, first of all, you should ascertain wherein lies the virtue of devotion; for there are many counterfeits, but only one true devotion; and, therefore, if you do not find that which is real, you will but deceive yourself, and vainly pursue an idle, superstitious form.

Aurelius gave to all his works of art the countenance of the women he loved; and so every one colors his devotion according to his tastes and inclinations. One is given to fasting, and whilst he fasts he holds himself to be devout, although his heart is full of bitterness; and whilst he will not touch his lips with wine, nor even with water for abstinence' sake, he scruples not to sully them with his neighbor's blood in slander and calumny. Another would fain be devout because he daily repeats many prayers, although, at the same time, he gives way to angry, proud, and injurious language amongst his servants or associates. Another willingly opens his purse to give alms to the poor, but he cannot open his heart to forgive his enemies. Another forgives his enemies, but only

force obliges him to do justice to his creditors. Such men may pass for devout, but they are not really so.

When the messengers of Saul sought David, they found only an image in his bed, which, being dressed by Michol in David's garments, deceived them so that they imagined it to be David himself. Thus many persons clothe themselves with a garb of external devotion, and the world believes them to be really devout and spiritual, whilst in truth they are mere statues or phantasms of devotion.

True, living devotion, my Philothea, implies the love of God. Indeed it is itself a true love of Him in the highest form, for whereas divine love enlightening our soul is called Grace, and makes us pleasing in His sight; so giving us power to do good, it is called Charity; and when it reaches that point of perfection wherein it not only causes us to do good, but to do it earnestly, frequently, and readily, then it is called Devotion. The ostrich never flies, the common fowl flies but seldom, and then heavily and near the ground; but the swallow, the dove, and the eagle are ever on the wing, they fly far and easily. Even so sinners rise not to God, but always grovel on the earth in pursuing earthly things; well-meaning people who are as yet not truly devout, mount up to God in good works, but rarely, slowly, and heavily; whilst the devout fly to Him perpetually, soaring lightly. In short, devotion is spiritual agility and vivacity, by means of which charity works in us, or we in her, with love and readiness; and as charity leads us to obey and fulfill all God's commandments, so devotion leads us to obey them with promptitude and diligence. Therefore no one who fails to observe all these commandments can be truly virtuous or devout, since to that end he must have charity, and further, thorough readiness and eagerness to fulfill the laws of charity.

And as devotion consists in perfect charity, so it not only makes us active, ready, and diligent in keeping God's commandments, but furthermore it stimulates us to the eager and loving performance of all the good works we can attain unto, even such as are not enjoined us, but only suggested or counseled. Even as a man just recovered from an



illness walks on his journey only as far as is absolutely necessary, with pain and difficulty, so the repentant sinner treads in God's ways heavily and slowly until, having attained the grace of devotion, he resembles the healthy and light-hearted traveler, who not only proceeds on his way, but runs, and leaps with joy in the way of God's commandments, hastening into the paths of His heavenly counsels and inspirations. In truth, charity and devotion differ no further than flame and fire, for charity is a spiritual fire which when it flames brightly, becomes devotion; and devotion adds to the fire of charity a flame which renders it ready, active, and diligent, not only in keeping His commandments, but in carrying out His heavenly inspirations and counsels of perfection.