

THE SERMONS OF  
ST. FRANCIS DE SALES  
FOR  
ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS



St. Francis de Sales  
1567-1622  
Bishop, Founder of the Visitation,  
and Doctor of the Church

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ST. FRANCIS DE SALES  
FOR  
ADVENT  
AND  
CHRISTMAS

Volume IV in the Series

Translated by Nuns of the Visitation

Edited by Father Lewis S. Fiorelli, O.S.F.S.

*“Urged solely by His immense goodness, God  
became incarnate for us.”*

—St. Francis de Sales

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“Let us come close to the crib. If you  
love riches, you will find the gold that the kings brought;  
if you are looking for the smoke of honors,  
you will find that in the incense;  
and if you take delight in the delicacies of the senses,  
you will find the delicate perfume of myrrh that pervades the stable.  
Be rich in love for this adorable Saviour,  
respectful in the familiarity  
with which you relate to Him,  
and delight in the joy of experiencing in your soul  
so many inspirations and affections  
because you belong exclusively to Him.”

—*St. Francis de Sales*

## **The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales**

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## ABOUT ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

St. Francis de Sales, the holy bishop, founder, and Doctor of the Church, is known throughout the Church for his great sanctity, learning, theological knowledge, gentleness, and understanding of the human soul. Through these gifts he converted and guided innumerable souls to God during his own lifetime, and re-converted 70,000 from Calvinism. He continues to direct many souls through his spiritual writings and published sermons. Today St. Francis de Sales is known as one of the great figures of the Catholic Counter-Reformation and of the 17th-century rebirth of Catholic mystical life.

St. Francis was born in 1567 in the castle belonging to the de Sales family in Thorens, Savoy, located in what is now southeastern France. His mother, Francoise, was only 14 years old when Francis, her firstborn, came into the world. This maternity was a dangerous one, the labor was long and difficult, and it was marvelled that both mother and child did not die. It is most noteworthy that a month before the birth Francoise had consecrated her unborn child to Our Lord in the presence of the Holy Shroud, which at that time was kept in the Sainte Chapelle in Chambéry, France.

Later, Francis was to have a great devotion to the Holy Shroud because his mother had been delivered much better than expected through her veneration of this holy relic. He considered the Shroud to be his country's shield and greatest relic. It was his favorite devotional picture, and he had numerous images of it painted, engraved and embroidered, placing them in his room, chapel, oratory, study, reception rooms and breviary. St. Francis de Sales wrote that his devotion to the Holy Shroud was due to the fact that "my mother, when I was still in her womb, dedicated me to Our Lord before this holy banner of salvation."

As he grew older, St. Francis de Sales studied literature, law, philosophy and theology in Paris and Padua. Upon finishing his studies, he received a doctorate in civil and canon law. Though he could have had a brilliant secular career, he set his soul on following the call of God to the priesthood, and was ordained in 1593 at age 26. He was consecrated Bishop of Geneva at age 35, and was to remain Bishop of Geneva for the remaining 20 years of his life. Some years after St. Francis de Sales took charge of Geneva, King Henry IV suggested to him the possibility of a transfer to a diocese with more worldly advantages; the saint replied in words that soon became famous all over Paris: "Sire, I have married a poor wife and I cannot desert her for a richer one."

Shortly after becoming a bishop, St. Francis met St. Jane Frances de Chantal, a widow; between these two saints there grew a deep spiritual friendship. St. Francis became the spiritual director of Jane Frances, and with her, he founded in 1610 the religious order of nuns known as the Order of the Visitation, or the Visitandines.

Both of these saints loved the Heart of Jesus, and conceived this Heart as the particular treasure confided to the nuns of the Visitation. It is most remarkable that 60 years before the great revelations of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to the Visitandine St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1673-1675), St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane Frances de Chantal had very often spoken to their spiritual daughters of this sacred love. St. Francis de Sales stated that the Visitandines who followed the Rule would receive the privilege of bearing the title, "Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus." Although devotion to the Heart of Jesus was at this time very little known, God was drawing these two souls to prepare the Visitation as a holy sanctuary to receive the famous revelations to come. Years later, with His revelations to St. Margaret Mary at the Visitation of Paray-le-Monial, God called this order to share with the entire Church the knowledge of the love of His Divine Heart.

In these Advent and Christmas sermons St. Francis de Sales deems it very important to help his hearers understand the

holy mystery of the Incarnation. He himself had once received wonderful supernatural lights on this mystery on the occasion of receiving Holy Communion from Pope Clement VIII on March 25, 1599. Of this experience he wrote, "The day of the Annunciation, having received Holy Communion from the hands of the supreme pontiff, my soul was very much consoled interiorly. God deigned to grant me a great understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation. He gave me to understand how in an inexplicable manner the Word had voluntarily taken flesh through the power of the Father and the operation of the Holy Spirit in the most chaste womb of Mary and so commenced to live among us. The God-Man also gave me a deep and exquisite knowledge of transubstantiation and about His entrance into my soul; He also gave me special lights about the ministry of the pastors of the Church."

St. Francis was also deeply devoted to St. John the Baptist, who is often spoken of in these sermons; he called him the father and the son of the Visitation of Mary. As Providence would have it, he preached his first public sermon on the feast of St. John the Baptist, June 24, 1593—making a deep impression on all, especially his bishop, who was filled with joy at the great graces he foresaw would come to souls through the new "apostle."

As a spiritual director, St. Francis de Sales was for a time the confessor of Blessed Marie of the Incarnation (Madame Barbe Acarie). This saintly woman was a wife, mother of six children, Parisian hostess, mystic, and foundress of five Carmelite convents.

St. Francis de Sales wrote two of the greatest Catholic masterpieces on the spiritual life: the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God*. The former shows how holiness is possible for all people in the state of grace, including people living in the world. This book was a best-seller in the 17th century and is still popular today. The *Treatise on the Love of God* covers all aspects of the virtue of charity, the supernatural love of God. St. Francis de Sales' pamphlets against the Calvinist heresy have been gathered

together into a book and given the title *Controversies*. The arguments presented in the *Controversies* are just as unanswerable today as when they were written. A statement in this material supporting papal infallibility was studied by the Council Fathers at Vatican Council I in 1870, over 270 years after St. Francis wrote it. Because of his writings, St. Francis de Sales has become the patron of writers and journalists; he has also been designated patron saint of the Catholic press.

Two months before his death, St. Francis de Sales received a heavenly warning of his approaching end. In his will he wrote, "I order that at my burial thirteen candles be lit around my coffin, without any other shield except that of the name of Jesus, to show that with all my heart I embrace the faith preached by the apostles."

At Christmas Midnight Mass in 1622 St. Francis de Sales preached the sermon which was to be his last published sermon. (Sermon 7 of this volume.) His words that night possessed a supernatural eloquence, and afterwards the Mother Superior asked him if he had received some extraordinary grace during the Mass; she said, "It seemed to me that I saw the Archangel Gabriel by your side as you were intoning the *Gloria in Excelsis*." The saint answered somewhat vaguely, but when pressed further, replied, "It is true that never before have I received such great consolation at the altar: the divine Child was visible there and yet invisible. Why should not the angels be there also? But I will tell you no more: there are too many people around us." Three days later, on December 28, at age 55, Bishop Francis de Sales rendered his soul back to God.

The beatification of St. Francis de Sales, which occurred the very year he died, was the first formal beatification ever held in St. Peter's Basilica. He was canonized in 1665, and was declared a Doctor of the Universal Church by Pope Pius IX in 1877. With this declaration the Church presented the teachings of St. Francis de Sales to all the faithful as a sure guide to true Catholic doctrine and the ways of the spiritual life—a sure guide to Heaven.



## PREFACE

Although honored by the request to write an introduction to the sermons which are included in this volume, I have found the task to be a daunting one. St. Francis de Sales is the patron of our diocese and so deserving of our devotion and piety. He was the founder and is the continuing inspiration of a religious community which has served this and innumerable other dioceses in America, Europe and throughout the world with gentle charity and with loving concern for the poor and disadvantaged. He was a model bishop, making himself all things to all people. Long before the word came into popular usage, he actively engaged in the practice of the grassroots ecumenism which longs to see all Christians reunited in the bonds of charity and faith for which Jesus Himself prayed. He is the author of several volumes of sermons, treatises, conferences and informal conversations which have nourished the spiritual lives of Christians for over three hundred and fifty years. Over and above all these admirable accomplishments, he is a saint and a Doctor of the Catholic Church. The mere telling of his spiritual, pastoral and personal qualities and accomplishments is enough to render any praise which I might offer to him unnecessary and superfluous. Equally, it should convince my readers that the words of St. Francis de Sales which they will find in this volume are words of life, vibrant echoes of the words of Jesus and of the Spirit whom Jesus sent to the Church for its guidance and holiness.

The sermons presented in this small book are those delivered by St. Francis for the Sundays and feasts of the liturgical year beginning with the Second Sunday of Advent and concluding with the Second Sunday after the Epiphany. They were spoken, for the most part, during the period 1620-1622,

one of them only three days before the Saint's final pilgrimage to his Lord in Heaven. They are, thus, words which reveal to us the fullness of Francis' mature pastoral concern, his personal love of the Incarnate Saviour and the engaging simplicity with which he addressed his audience. His procedure is to comment on the Gospel selection read in the Mass of the day and to use its message as a springboard for instruction on the practical aspects of Christian conduct in everyday life. These sermons were delivered in the presence of a community of his beloved Sisters of the Visitation, to whom he was both a father and spiritual director. They have the uncomplicated freshness and informality of one who feels thoroughly at home with his audience, before whom he is completely himself and for whose benefit he pours out his whole heart and spirit.

With Francis, we shall not find that formal and ornate rhetorical style which characterizes so many 17th-century sermons. Rather, he is content to follow the advice which he gave to St. Jeanne de Chantal's brother, Andre Fremyot, when the latter was named Archbishop of Bourges: "To speak well, it is enough to love well." Accustomed as he was to making use of homely, down to earth and, sometimes, legendary examples to convey his message, he is, in these sermons, as he himself said in another context, a "barber and not a surgeon," by which he meant to say: "When I am preaching in the choir before seculars, I give no pain. I only throw perfumes, I only speak of virtues and of matters likely to console our hearts; I play a little on the flute and dwell on the praises which we ought to render to God." (*Spiritual Conferences of St. Francis de Sales*, Gasquet-Mackey, Conf. XVI—"On Antipathies," p. 238). His words are thus intended for all Christians, regardless of their state or position in life. Although aware of human faults and frailties, he habitually emphasizes the love of God as the true pole star of Christian life, and he gently, yet constantly, encourages his hearers to focus their lives and their vision on its unfailing light.

Readers of these pages will, perhaps, be struck by the length

of Francis' sermons, for they are habitually longer than those which are common in our day. They will want to note, at the same time, the richness and the wide range of his thought. Drawing on both the Old and the New Testaments, the writing of the Fathers of the Church, the lives of the Saints, and sometimes on examples found in classical literature, he weaves an extraordinarily full and colorful tapestry of thought, against which the simple words of the Gospel text come to life and receive brilliant illumination. While styles and taste in preaching change with the centuries (for they should be adapted to their own times and their own audiences), the message of the Gospel, which is Francis' chief concern, does not change. His words are as meaningful to Christians of our times as they were to those of the 17th century.

Above all else, however, readers of these pages should allow the gentle and devoted spirit of St. Francis de Sales to touch their hearts and minds as he touched the hearts and minds of his own audiences. That spirit is a spirit on which has been indelibly impressed a tender and deep devotion to the God who is Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier of each and every member of the human race. It is a spirit suffused with that wisdom which looks beyond the surface of persons and events and sees the ever present Providence of God in human affairs. It is a spirit which burns bright with a consuming love for our Lord and Saviour, for Him who gave His life that we might find life in Him. It is a spirit shot through with love for the Church, for its unity, for its members united to Jesus Christ as the tendrils of the vine are united to its stock. It is a spirit which willingly recognizes the value of all that is truly human in each individual and consistently encourages its growth and development. It is a spirit which is humble, simple, clear-eyed in its perception of human limitations and yet convinced that God, in His infinite mercy, has called each and every one of His human creatures to enjoy friendship with Him in this life and throughout all eternity. It is the spirit of the pastoral bishop whom St. Francis, unconsciously depicting his own self-portrait, described as

“a man gentle, charitable, and zealous for God’s glory, a vigilant pastor; in short, a man perfect in every virtue and one who performs carefully all the duties of his office, having the two natures of his soul so well ordered that there is nothing of hatred in him except for sin and nothing of love except for the love of our dear Saviour.” (Sermon for December 6, 1620, p. 17-18 of this volume).

I express my gratitude to the Sisters of the Visitation who have labored lovingly over the translation of these sermons. In making them available to the members of their own communities, they have also made them available to the entire English-speaking Church. This service is yet one more manifestation of their devotion to the Church and to its members, a devotion of which I and all the members of the Diocese of Wilmington are gratefully conscious. May God grant that each of us who reads these pages will be animated with St. Francis de Sales’ “spirit of compassion to befriend all on the way to salvation.” (Mass of St. Francis de Sales, January 24).

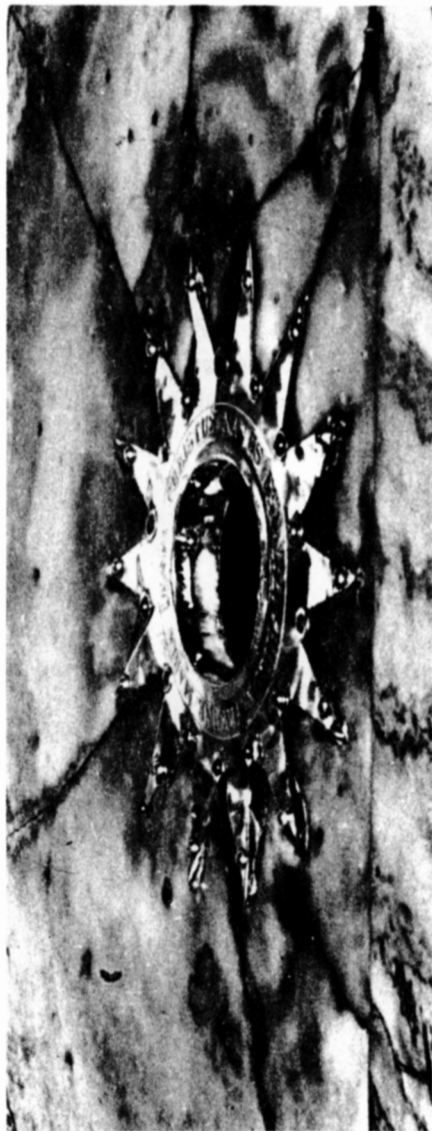
Robert E. Mulvee  
Bishop of Wilmington

Feast of the Transfiguration  
August 6, 1987

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The nine sermons for Advent and Christmas contained in this book were translated from St. Francis de Sales' *Oeuvres*, Tomes 8, 9 and 10 (Annecy: Niérat, 1892-1964).

The first volume of this series, *Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Prayer*, includes an Introduction on the Origins and Value of the Sermons which was also taken from the Annecy edition.



Silver star marking the spot of the birth of Our Lord in Bethlehem; it was here that the Virgin Mary first beheld the Infant Jesus as He lay on the ground. The star was placed on this spot in 1717, replacing an earlier marker. It is 56 centimeters in diameter and has 14 points in accord with the genealogy in *Matthew* 1:17. Mystically symbolic of Christ's divinity, it bears the Latin inscription, *Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est*.

## SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST SENDS HIS DISCIPLES TO JESUS

*Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 1620, concerning why St. John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He were the Messias although he already knew He was, three reasons why God asks questions, John's desire to make Jesus known to the whole world, to guide his disciples directly to Jesus and to detach his disciples from himself, how St. John adapted himself to his disciples' weakness, how St. Paul adapted his instruction to his hearers, how Our Lord identified Himself by pointing to His works, the spiritual significance of these works: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead men are resuscitated and the poor have the Gospel preached to them, the "scandal" of the Cross and its necessity for salvation, Our Lord's praise of St. John the Baptist and the reasons He did not deliver it in the presence of John's disciples, St. John's unshakable spiritual stability and our fickleness, and St. Ambrose's great meekness yet unshakable firmness.*

*"Are you he who is to come or are we to look for another?"—Matt. 11:3*

Today's Gospel [Matt. 11:2-10] is divided into three parts, each of which we shall speak about now. The first treats of how St. John, while imprisoned for the truth, sent two of his disciples [Lk. 7:19] to Our Lord to learn whether He was the promised Messias or whether they were to look for another. The second concerns the Saviour's response to them.

And the third concerns what is said of St. John after the departure of his disciples.

It is truly amazing that our ancient Fathers, though so discerning and so insightful in explaining and developing even the most obscure difficulties presented by Holy Scripture, nevertheless find themselves wondering how to understand the first part of today's Gospel: that St. John, who knew Our Lord, nevertheless sent his disciples to learn if He were that great Prophet, that promised Messiah, or if they should look for another. For, they ask, since St. John certainly knew that He was indeed the Messiah, why does he send someone to ask Him that?

There is no doubt that he knew that the One to whom he sent his envoys was truly the Messiah. For he knew Him while he was still in his mother's womb, and there is no saint with a more penetrating knowledge of the mystery of the Incarnation than this glorious St. John. He was Our Lady's pupil. He was sanctified by the dear Saviour of our souls when Our Lady went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. He surely knew Him from that moment and, leaping with joy in his mother's womb [*Lk.* 1:41, 42], he adored Him and consecrated himself to His service. He was His Precursor, and announced His coming to the world. It was he who baptized Him, who saw the Holy Spirit descend as a dove on Him and who heard the voice of the Father saying: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." It is he who pointed Him out in these words: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" [*Matt.* 3:13-17; *Jn.* 1:29-36].

Thus he indeed knew Our Lord and never wavered in the least regarding who He was and in his belief and certitude of His coming. Then why, ask our ancient Fathers, does John, while in prison and hearing of the great prodigies and miracles wrought by our Divine Master, send his disciples to learn who He is and whether it is He who is to come or if they are to wait for another? Certainly, they all unravel the difficulty admirably. And if I wanted to relate to you their many and varied opinions on this topic it would take too much



time and rob us of that which we wish to use for our instruction. I shall pause only long enough to give what two of our greatest Doctors, St. Hilary and St. Chrysostom, say about it. It seems to me that they have hit the nail right on the head and have gone straight to the point of the truth.

These holy Fathers say that we do not ask questions always to learn something, or because we are ignorant of what we ask. There are many other purposes and reasons for our questions. Otherwise the Divine Majesty would never have asked any question, since He knows everything and cannot be ignorant of anything whatsoever. He penetrates the inmost depths of the heart and there is nothing, however secret or hidden, that is not most clear and manifest to that Divine Wisdom. [*Ecclus.*(*Sir.*) 42:18-20; *Heb.* 4:13]. That is what the Royal Prophet David, that great and divine poet, says in his Psalm: O Lord, my path and my line You have searched out. [*Ps.* 138(139):1-9]. As if he said: "Though I am shrewd as a fox, nevertheless You penetrate all my shrewdness. Though I have been like a stag that has run and leaped through impenetrable thickets, surrounded by thorns and briars, You are the Divine Hunter who has nevertheless observed all my progress and my traces; You saw from afar where I was, for Your eyes see and penetrate everything. What shall I do to conceal myself from You? If I ascend into Heaven, You are there; and there I shall find You much more present than I am to myself. If, like the break of day and the beautiful dawn, I fly over the waters, You will be there sooner than I. I cannot escape from before Your face; what shall I do then, O Lord?"

From this it is clear that God knows all things, and yet He has asked many questions of people; His Divine Providence asked these questions for three different reasons. First, in order to make them confess their sins. He did this when Adam transgressed His commandment. He called him, saying to him: "Adam. Where are you?" and demanded of our first mother, Eve, what she had done. [*Gen.* 3:9, 13]. It was certainly not because He did not know where Adam was,

or the act of disobedience that he had committed. The Lord questioned him in order to make him acknowledge his fault so that He might pardon him. And instead of confessing it, that miserable man threw the blame on his wife. [Gen. 3:12]. Because he did not confess his sin, he with all his posterity was chastised by God. Some of the Fathers hold that if, when God called him, he had confessed his sin, if he had struck his breast and said a fervent *Peccavi*, "I have sinned"<sup>1</sup> [2 Kgs. (2 Sam.) 12:13], the Lord would have pardoned him and would not have chastised him with the scourge with which He punished him with all his descendants. But inasmuch as he did not do so, we remain stained with the sin of our first parents and are consequently subject to the penalty that he drew upon himself.

The second reason why the Divine Majesty poses questions to men is to enlighten them or instruct them on what concerns the mysteries of Faith, as He did in the case of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. [Lk. 24:15, 17, 25-27]. Appearing to them in the guise of a pilgrim, He asked them what they were talking about, questioning them and enlightening them on the doubt they were experiencing concerning His Resurrection. He did not, then, ask them about their conversation because He was ignorant of what they were speaking, but rather so that by confessing their ignorance and their doubts they might be instructed and enlightened.

The third reason why questions can be asked is to provoke love. For example, Magdalen, after the Death and Passion of Our Lord, went to anoint and embalm His sacred body. [Mk. 16:1]. Finding the tomb opened, she wept bitterly. She saw two angels there. They asked her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" "Alas," she replied, "because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid Him." Then, going a little further, she came upon Our Lord in the guise of a gardener. He questioned her: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" [Jn. 20:11-15].

Certainly it is no surprise that the angels were puzzled to see Magdalen weep, still less that they asked her why,

for they do not know how to weep. (Although it is said mystically that angels weep, Holy Scripture uses the expression [*Is.* 33:7] only to symbolize their terror at some formidable thing. But they do not weep.) Knowing that human nature is subject to tears, our dear Saviour asks this woman why she is weeping. And why, Lord, do You ask her? Do You not know very well the cause of her sorrow and for what she is searching? Surely, He knew all this quite well. It was not to find out that He questioned her, since all things are most clear and manifest to Him. [*Heb.* 4:13]. But this dear Saviour of our souls posed such and similar questions to elicit ejaculatory prayers and acts of love and union.

Therefore, we do not always ask questions only because of ignorance, to know or to find out something, but for different reasons. So the glorious St. John did not send his disciples to Our Lord to find out whether or not He was the Messiah, for he had no doubt about that. He had three reasons for sending those disciples to Jesus.

First, to make Him known to the whole world. He had already spent time preaching His coming, His miracles, and His greatness to his disciples. Now he wanted them to see Him whom he had announced to them. Surely, to make God known should be the principal aim of all doctors and preachers. Teachers and those who govern and have charge of souls ought neither to seek nor to obtain anything but this: that He whom they preach and in whose name they teach may be known to everyone. That was this glorious saint's wish.

The only sign by which God may be found and known is God Himself. At our Saviour's birth the angels sought out the shepherds and announced to them His coming, singing in a wonderfully pleasing melody these sacred and oft-repeated words: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. But to confirm the miracle they had made known to them, they said: Go see Him, and then you will believe and hold for certain what we announce to you. [*Lk.* 2:10-14]. For there is no means nor certain sign for finding God but God Himself.<sup>2</sup> This is why our glorious saint, after having long preached to his disciples the coming

of Our Lord, now sends them to Him not only that they may know Him, but still more that they may make Him known to others.

The second reason he sent them was this: he did not want to draw disciples to himself, but only to his Teacher, to whose school he now sends them so that they might be instructed personally by Him. For what else was he suggesting in this sending but this: "Although I teach and preach to you, it is not to attract you to myself, but rather to Jesus Christ, whose voice I am. [*Jn.* 1:23]. That is why I am sending you to Him. Learn from Him whether He is the promised Messiah, or whether you are to look for another." By this John meant: "I am not content to assure you that it is He whom we await. I am sending you that you may be instructed by Him personally to that effect." Surely, doctors and preachers, teachers of novices, and those who have charge of souls have done something worthwhile only to the extent that they have sent their disciples and those in their care to Our Lord's school, to be plunged into His sea of knowledge. They were successful only to the degree that they urged and persuaded others to seek out our dear Saviour to be instructed by Him personally. This is what the great Apostle meant in writing to the Corinthians: My little children, whom I have conceived and won for Jesus Christ amidst so many pains, fatigues and labors, and for whom I have suffered so much anguish and torment, I assure you that I did not teach you so as to attract you to myself, but only so as to draw you to my Lord Jesus Christ. [*I Cor.* 4:9-16; cf. *Gal.* 4:19].

If teachers and those who have spiritual care of others try, by beautiful words, to draw to themselves the disciples whom they teach and the souls for whom they care, they are like pagans, heretics, and others who talk and ramble on, and who take great pains in the pulpit to deliver beautiful, subtle and finely crafted discourses, whose sole purpose is not to lead souls to Jesus Christ, but only to themselves! They attract others to themselves by their words and impressive language. There is no real substance here, only babbling and

cackling, yet they captivate many weak spirits in this way. True servants of God, on the contrary, preach and teach those whom they guide only so as to lead them to God, as much by their words as by their works. This is what St. John does today, and to this all superiors ought to pay careful attention. For they will never achieve success but by directing and sending their disciples to Our Lord to learn from Him what He is and to study under Him so as to know and to do what is necessary for His love and service.

The third reason St. John sent his disciples to Our Lord was to detach them from himself. He feared they would be led into the great error of esteeming him more than the Saviour. They were already complaining to St. John in this manner: Teacher, you and we, your disciples, along with the Pharisees, fast. We are poorly clothed and do great penance. But this man, this great prophet who performs so many miracles among us, does not do so. [*Matt.* 9:14; *Mk.* 2:18]. In hearing this, and in seeing that the love and esteem which his disciples felt for him was beginning to produce in them a feeling of contempt for Jesus Christ, St. John sent them to this Divine Majesty to be instructed and informed of the truth.

It was not, therefore, because St. John doubted in the least that Our Lord was the Messiah that he sent his disciples to question Him. He sent them for their own benefit and advantage and to make Him known to the whole world; not to draw them to himself but to detach them from him; to let them see the miracles that Jesus Christ performed so that they might come to Him in a manner worthy of Him. He deals with them as befits their status as still children. He assuredly believed that Jesus is the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.<sup>3</sup> [*Jn.* 1:29]. And certainly he could, by his own words, have brought them to understand this truth, but he chose to direct them to Our Lord for this instruction. He could have sent them to Him to adore and confess Him; but, accommodating himself to their weakness and infirmity, he sent them only to ask Him

who He is and whether He is "He who is to come" or whether they should look for another. Surely those who direct souls must make themselves all things to all men, as the Apostle says to save all [*1 Cor.* 9:19-22]. Let them be gentle with some and severe with others, children with children, strong with the strong, weak with the weak; in short, they need great discretion so as to accommodate themselves to each one's need.

St. Paul himself practiced this marvelously, for he made himself as a child with children, and for this reason he often addressed Christians as "my little children." [*Gal.* 4:19]. Writing to the Thessalonians he said: My little children, I became as a little one in the midst of you, so that I might save all of you. I walked with little steps, and not with the steps of a great Apostle. For you would hardly have been able to follow such steps, being little children. I adapted myself to your weakness, and I walked slowly with you as a little child. Furthermore, I have been in your midst as a nursing mother [*1 Thess.* 2:7-8]; I gave you milk to drink and nourished you with food suited to your littleness. [*1 Cor.* 3:1-2].

St. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, outstanding in all he wrote, but particularly on the subject of this Apostle, said in the beginning of a sermon on the Epistle to the Hebrews (I do not know if I can recall it exactly): "Here is an amazing thing; when this great Apostle was among his Corinthians, he was like a nursing mother among her children. He nourished them with simple food, which was sweet and suited to little children. On the contrary, when he wrote to the Hebrews it was with a doctrine so profound, and a style so elevated, that it is without parallel."

If you want to understand how St. Paul was in the midst of the Corinthians,<sup>4</sup> look at a mother who has five or six children around her. Notice this woman's skill, how she can give to each one what is appropriate and can treat each one according to his understanding. To the one who is only one, two or three years old she gives milk; she uses baby talk with him and plays with him. She does not expect him to say

“father” and “mother” but only “papa” and “mama.” Being so very young, he cannot yet pronounce the words “father” and “mother.” Those that are four or five years old she teaches to talk better and to eat more solid food. Those a little older she instructs in courtesy and modesty.

“Now,” writes this holy Father, “when the great Apostle said, ‘I am among you as a nursing mother,’ what does he mean but that he acts toward his disciples as a nursing mother does toward her children?” It is certainly necessary for those who guide souls to have great zeal to learn all that is required to guide them according to their capacity and attraction. They must use great discernment so as to give them the food of God’s word at the fitting and appropriate time so that it may be well received, and again great discernment to give each one what he needs and in the way best suited to him. Let no one say, “You do not speak to me for my perfection as much as you do to this other person.” I reply, “I do not think you have enough teeth to handle the practices that are recommended to others.<sup>5</sup> You could not masticate them.” You answer, “I think I do have enough teeth.” “Surely, you have even fewer than you think since you believe you have more! Ah, then, let yourself be governed by others.” And this is my first point.

The second part of our Gospel is the response Our Lord made to John’s disciples. Reflecting on this response, some Doctors have been astonished. Relate to John what you have heard and seen; the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead men are resuscitated and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. (That the poor have the Gospel preached to them is considered a miracle here.) These Doctors note that the Saviour did not work many miracles in the presence of John’s disciples, but that the Apostles told them of those He had worked. Most certainly, the Apostles delighted in relating the wonderful works of their good Master to these two disciples. But Our Lord also performed many miracles in their presence, which is why He answered them: Relate to John what you hear and see.

Some of our early Fathers, namely St. Hilary and St. Chrysostom, dwell upon this answer which Our Lord gave to those who asked Him who He was. "You ask Me whether I am that great Prophet, the promised Messiah, He who thunders in the heavens [cf. 2 Kgs. (2 Sam.) 22:14] and who is to come to crush the head of the enemy. [Gen. 3:15]. I answer you: Relate what you have heard and seen." Oh wonderful humility of our dear Saviour who comes to confound our pride and to destroy our false sense of superiority! They ask Him: "Who are You?" and His only answer is: "Relate what you have heard and seen." He answers thus to teach us that it is our works and not our words that give testimony to what we are, we who are so full of pride.

If anyone were to ask a gentleman today, "Who are you?" he would consider such a question a challenge to his honor and would no doubt cut his questioner's throat on the spot! "Who are you?" "Must I show you my lineage and ancestry? Must I produce my pedigree for you? Must I demonstrate whether my ancestors are descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?" (Such silliness is absolute nonsense!) Surely, there is no need whatsoever of displaying all these nothings to prove that you are a gentleman. But when asked the question: "Who are you?" you must reply: "Relate what you see, a man gentle, cordial, benevolent, the protector of widows, the father of orphans and minors, charitable and benign towards his subjects. If you have seen and heard such things, say assuredly that you have seen a real gentleman." If you address yourself to a bishop: "Who are you?" he should be able to render this testimony of himself: "Relate that you see a man who fulfills his charge well and devoutly." Then you may be assured that he is truly a bishop. If a religious is asked: "Who are you?" and if she is seen to be exact and punctual in the observance of her rules, she can answer that she is truly a religious. In short, it is our works, whether good or bad, that form us, and it is by them that we ought to be recognized.

When asked, "Who are you?" do not be content to answer



like little children in catechism class: "I am a Christian"; rather, live in such a manner that one will recognize clearly in you a person who loves God with his whole heart, one who keeps the Commandments, frequents the Sacraments, and does all things worthy of a true Christian. I do not mean that when we are asked who we are we must not say that we are Christians. Oh, certainly not! It is the most beautiful title we can give ourselves. I have always had a special devotion to that great St. Blandina who was martyred at Lyon and whose life was written by Eusebius. Amidst all the excruciating torments of her martyrdom, she kept repeating gently, "I am a Christian," making use of this word as a sacred balm to heal all her wounds. All I mean is that it is not enough to be *called* a Christian if we do not perform the works of a Christian. After all, what are we? A little dust and ashes. [*Gen.* 3:19; 18:27].

Let us, then, candidly admit that we are nothing, that we can do nothing, that we know nothing. What nonsense that, being what we are, we nevertheless wish to make a show and to walk on tiptoe in order to be seen by everyone! But what will they actually see in seeing us? A little dust and a body all too soon corrupted in death!

"Tell John that the blind see." O God, what greater blindness than ours. Though full of abjection and misery, we nevertheless wish to be esteemed something! What can blind us in this way except self-love which, besides being blind itself, also blinds the one in whom it dwells? Those who paint Cupid always cover his eyes to indicate that love is blind. This should be understood still more of self-love, which is blind to its own abjection and the nothingness, from which it proceeds and of which it is formed. Surely, it is a great grace and sign of interior conversion when God gives us His light to know our misery. He who truly knows himself is not annoyed when he is held and treated for what he is. For he has received that light which frees him of his blindness.

"Tell John that the lame walk." Whether the infirm of whom Our Lord speaks here were lame in one limb or both scarcely

matters. But most of those who live in this world are lame in both. We all have two natures which are like our two legs. These two natures are the irascible and the concupiscible. When they are not well-regulated and mortified, they render a person lame. The concupiscible nature covets wealth, honors, dignities, preeminence, pleasures and delicacies, and renders a person covetous and avaricious, causing him to limp to one side.

There are others who, though not avaricious, have so strong an irascible nature that when it is not rightly submissive to reason, it causes them to be troubled, and to resent inordinately the least things done to them. They get up their guard and continually look for ways to avenge themselves for any little word or wrong done them. Now, to whatever side it turns, be it good or bad, this nature is very strong; but when it turns to the side of evil, it is difficult indeed to set it right. Very many have both natures damaged, and these limp on both sides; others limp on only one. Our Lord came to cure the lame; He came to make them walk upright before His face in the observance of His Commandments. [Cf. *Lk.* 1:6]. Therefore He adds: Relate to John that the lame walk.

“Tell John that lepers are cured.” There are a great many spiritual lepers in the world. This evil is a certain languor and tepidity in God’s service. Persons thus afflicted have neither a fever nor a life-threatening illness, but their bodies are so infected with this leprosy that they are completely enfeebled and broken down. By this I mean that they have no major imperfections and commit no grave faults, but they do commit and omit so many little ones that their heart remains quite weak and languid. And the most dangerous thing of all is that while in this state they cannot be touched or moved without being pricked to the heart. Surely, those infected with this leprosy are very much like little lizards, vile and abject animals, the feeblest and simplest of all. Yet despite their weakness and infirmity, they immediately turn to bite us if we touch them ever so lightly. Spiritual lepers act the

same. Although they are covered over with an infinite number of minutely small imperfections, they are so haughty that they do not want to be seen nor touched in any way. And if you rebuke them ever so slightly, they immediately turn to bite you.

“Tell John that the deaf hear.” There is a spiritual deafness that is very dangerous. It is a certain vain complacency in ourselves and in what we do, so that, it seems to us, we no longer need any growth or improvement. We are no longer anxious to hear the word of God preached, or to read books of devotion, or to be reproved or corrected; we amuse ourselves with trifles, thereby placing ourselves in great peril. If it is a very good sign when a person listens willingly to the divine word, is it not a bad sign when she is disgusted with it and no longer feels she needs it?

“Tell John that dead men are resuscitated.” Actually, it is this sacred word that resuscitates the dead. It is by listening to preaching that we receive good inspirations and pass from sin to grace. It is by good reading, too, that the heart comes alive and ever gains new strength and vigor.

“Tell John that the poor have the Gospel preached to them.” Some say: The poor preach the Gospel. Whichever way we interpret it, it is almost one and the same thing; yet I prefer to keep to the text of our Gospel and say with Our Lord: the poor have the Gospel preached to them. Surely, St. John’s disciples did not find Our Lord among the princes and leaders of the world, but with the poor, who listened to Him and followed Him wherever He went. This dear Saviour of our souls came for the poor and took a singular pleasure in being with them. O God, with what gentleness He taught them! He made Himself all things to all men in order to save all.<sup>6</sup> [*I Cor.* 9:22]. He gives His Spirit to the poor and humble [*Is.* 61:1; *Lk.* 4:18] because poverty engenders humility. He flees the proud and haughty of heart, and gives Himself to the simple. [*Cf. Wis.* 1:5]. He lifts their heavy and sluggish spirit and gives them His own, with which they can do great things. [*Cf. Ps.* 103(104):29-30]. Thus

He confounds the high and mighty by the lowly and simple. [*1 Cor.* 1:27-28]. For this reason we can say in truth not only that the poor have the Gospel preached to them, but also that they preach the Gospel, God using them to carry His truth to the whole world.

It is indeed true that our dear Saviour and Master came to teach both the little and the great, the learned and the simple. Yet we almost always find Him among the poor and simple. How different is God's Spirit from that of the world, which esteems only appearance and pomp. Ancient philosophers received into their schools only those who had a good mind and sound judgment. Of those who did not possess these qualities they said openly, "Such a canvas is not suited to our brush." Today we see many simple folk despised by some people who become irritated and wearied by their conversation and who take pleasure only in being among lofty minds. No matter how haughty, proud and arrogant these people may be, the world still tolerates them. But God's Spirit does quite the contrary; It rejects the proud and converses with the humble. Our Lord even numbers this among His miracles: "Relate to John that the poor have the Gospel preached to them."

Then He adds: "Blessed is he who will not be scandalized in Me." What do You mean here, O Lord? How could it be possible for anyone to be scandalized after having seen You perform so many miracles and works of such great charity and mercy? "I will be," says the Lord, "the disgrace of men, the outcast of the people [*Ps.* 21(22):7]; I will be a scandal to the Jews and a stone of stumbling to Gentiles. [*1 Cor.* 1:23; *Rom.* 9:33; *1 Ptr.* 2:7-8]. But blessed is he who will not be scandalized in Me. For I, who am now working such great miracles in your midst, must be crucified and attached to a Cross. Because of that many will be scandalized." Oh, blessed are those who will not be scandalized at Our Lord's humiliations and ignominies when they see Him outcast and everybody's laughingstock. Blessed are they who, during this life, crucify themselves with Him, meditating

on His Passion and bearing in themselves His mortification. [2 Cor. 4:10].

Indeed, we must all go this route. We must attach ourselves to our Saviour's Cross, meditate on it, and bear in ourselves His mortification. There is no other road to Heaven. Our Lord travelled it first. Experience as many ecstasies, spiritual raptures and transports as you wish; even ravish the Eternal Father's Heart if you are able. Yet if with all this you do not dwell on the Saviour's Cross and practice self-mortification, I assure you that all the rest is absolutely nothing and will disappear in smoke and vanity; and you, in turn, will remain empty of all good, permitting yourselves to be scandalized at Our Lord's Passion as were many of His contemporaries. In short, there is no other gate to Heaven than that of humiliation and mortification.

Let me bring all this to a conclusion. The disciples, then, returned to St. John to relate what they had seen and heard. O God,<sup>8</sup> think of the hearts of these good disciples! How peaceful and filled with great consolation! How they must have tarried with their master, telling him everything they had seen and heard! How filled they must have been with great insights and knowledge concerning Our Lord's coming! How tenderly they must have conversed with one another about those wonderful miracles and prodigies He performed in their presence and those things related to them by the Apostles!

As they were setting out, the Saviour turned to those around Him and asked: What did you go out to the desert to see? Perhaps you went there to see a reed exposed to storms and tempests, or truly a rock immovable in the midst of the sea? (Similarly, we might ask: What did you go to see in the desert, that is, in religious life? For the desert is related to the origins of religious life, and religious life is nothing else but a desert of sorts.) So, what did you go out to see? Perhaps you found reeds there? Oh, no, St. John is not a reed, for he dwelt there like a rock, immovable in the midst of all the waves and tempests of tribulation.

But why did Our Lord not praise His Precursor in the presence of his disciples? Our ancient Fathers say that there were two reasons for this. First, because these good disciples were too attached to their master; they were captivated by him, and their esteem was so great as to prefer him to Jesus Christ, as when they said to John:<sup>9</sup> You and we, your disciples, perform great penances; but this Prophet, who is in our midst, does not. [*Matt.* 9:14; *Mk.* 2:18]. Obviously, they loved St. John greatly and had no need of Our Lord's praising him in their presence, for there was danger of their valuing him more highly than the Saviour. This is why this Divine Wisdom said nothing about him in their presence.

The other reason was because our Divine Master was no flatterer. If He had praised St. John, they might have thought He did it through flattery so that it might be brought back to him by his two disciples. This was very foreign to our dear Saviour's spirit. He is Truth Itself. The human spirit of John's disciples might also have added a little something on the subject. That is why He who sees all knew what could happen and did not praise him in the presence of his disciples.

But when they had departed, He asked the Jews: What did you go out to the desert to see? Consider this man whom you have seen, or rather this angel clothed in human form. You have found in him not a reed, but a firm rock, a man possessed of unshakable stability in the midst of all sorts of changing circumstances. This is the most agreeable and desirable virtue in the spiritual life.<sup>10</sup> You did not see a reed, for St. John is the same in adversity as in prosperity, the same in prison amidst persecutions as in the desert amidst applause; as joyous in the winter of trouble as in the spring-time of peace; he fulfilled the same role in prison as he did in the desert!

We, on the contrary, are forever changing. We vary according to time and season. There are some people so changeable that when the weather is fine, nothing can equal their joy; but when stormy, nothing can equal their depression. Such

people who are fervent, prompt and optimistic in prosperity will be weak, depressed and disheartened in adversity. It would then take Heaven and earth to restore them to peace, and ordinarily even then all our efforts are useless. You will find others who want only happy times because at such times they do marvels, or so it seems to them. Others prefer adversity. Tribulation, they say, keeps them close to God. In short, we are spiritually fickle and really do not know what we want. There are some who, when in consolation, cannot be restrained, but when sad, cannot be consoled. When we contradict them in nothing, O God, they are so strong and do such marvels! But if we touch them, if we contradict them in the slightest thing, all is lost. It is so difficult for us to be receptive even to the littlest thing which is contrary to our liking that our peace of soul cannot be restored until long afterwards, and many salves must be used. My God, what a shame that we are so inconstant! Surely, there is no stability in us, and yet this is the most essential quality in the spiritual life. We are reeds, tossed about in every direction by every mood and humor.

I shall finish by applying to the glorious St. Ambrose, the first Vespers of whose feast we are celebrating today, what Our Lord said in reference to St. John the Baptist: You have not seen a reed in the desert. You should have a special devotion to St. Ambrose because he was St. Augustine's spiritual father. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine tells us that not only St. Ambrose's learned preaching, but especially his meekness and gentleness, stole his heart away. He was French; that is, he was born in France, although St. Augustine met him in Milan. It is related in one of his biographies that while he was yet an infant, a swarm of bees formed a honeycomb on his lips—thus predicting a gentle and meek future for him. If we were to ask this glorious saint, "Who are you?" [*Jn.* 1:19] without doubt he would reply, "Relate what you have seen and heard. Relate that you have seen a man gentle, charitable and zealous for God's glory, a vigilant pastor; in short, a man perfect in every virtue and one who performs

carefully all the duties of his office, having the two natures of his soul so well ordered that there is nothing of hatred in him except for sin, and nothing of love except for the love of our dear Saviour."

Although he was extremely gentle and merciful, he was also very severe in punishing and reproving what was deserving of reprehension, never permitting himself to flinch before any consideration whatever. What zeal did he not display in his treatment of the Emperor Theodosius, refusing him entrance into the Church and speaking to him with great severity, never wavering until the Emperor had confessed his fault. And when he was reminded that it was an emperor he was reprehending, he testified that he regarded only God's glory.

At the time of this incident, some reminded Ambrose of King David's fault. "Ah, indeed," he answered, "you speak to me of David's fault, but you make no mention of his penitence. If the Emperor wishes to do as he did, the doors of the Church will be opened to him; otherwise, no."<sup>11</sup> And he showed indeed that without regard for king or emperor, he would remain firm in the exercise of his office. Relate then what you have seen and heard; for the fame of this great saint spread everywhere, so that very learned and experienced men came from great distances to hear his doctrine.

How true it is that man is known by his works!<sup>12</sup> So if we want to know what we are, we must look into our actions, reforming what is not good and perfecting what is, so that in imitating these two glorious saints in their virtues, we may enjoy with them the glory of Heaven.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## NOTES

1. Cf. St. Francis de Sales: *Controversies*, published under the title *The Catholic Controversy*, translated by Rev. Henry Benedict Mackey, O.S.B., under the direction of Rt. Rev. John Cuthbert Hedley, O.S.B., Vol. III of Library of St. Francis de Sales (London: Burns and



- Oates/New York: Catholic Publication Society Co., 1886), p. 7.
2. In a warm and simple manner, St. Francis de Sales is speaking here of the absolute priority of grace in the life of faith. Faith in God is the result neither of human nor angelic effort, but of God's grace—though God may use human and angelic agency to mediate that grace as He did with St. John the Baptist and the angels at Bethlehem.
  3. Cf. p. 2 of this sermon.
  4. Cf. St. Francis de Sales: *The Spiritual Conferences* (Westminster, Md: The Newman Press, 1962), XIII, "On the Spirit of the Rules," p. 254.
  5. Obviously "not having enough teeth" is here equivalent to "not having the wherewithal" for a particular job or task. Here, as in so many cases, St. Francis is speaking with tongue in cheek, gleam in the eye and smile on his face. He is making it as easy as possible for some in his congregation to accept their spiritual shortcomings; he does it so gently!
  6. Cf. p. 8 of this sermon.
  7. Cf. *Controversies*, p. 6-7, 9.
  8. The expressions "O God" and "O my God" are very characteristic of St. Francis de Sales, who lived and spoke in the presence of God.
  9. Cf. p. 7 of this sermon.
  10. Cf. *Spiritual Conferences*, III, "On Constancy."
  11. St. Francis de Sales is alluding here to St. Ambrose's threat of excommunication to the Emperor Theodosius for the vengeful massacre of 7,000 defenseless people in the Circus of Thessalonica in punishment for a riot in which several imperial officers were killed. St. Ambrose insisted that the Emperor do public penance for his crime. He did. (Cf. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. I, p. 374.)
  12. Cf. p. 10 of this sermon.