

Homily for January 24th 2017
Memorial of St. Frances de Sales

Francis de Sales was born of noble and pious parents, near Annecy, a district of the French Alps, in 1566. He was born two years after the death of John Calvin, whom I will return to in a minute. St Francis studied with brilliant success at Paris and Padua. On his return from Italy he gave up the grand career which his father had marked out for him in the service of the state, and became a priest. He embodied an interior attitude that displayed gentleness and charity in the service of his neighbor.

When the Duke of Savoy had resolved to restore the Church in the Chablais – where many Calvinists lived, Francis offered himself for the work, and set out on foot with his Bible and breviary and one companion, his cousin Louis of Sales. It was a work of toil, privation, and danger. He undertook this mission in the largely Protestant Chablais and, in the face of personal danger and suffering, he won many Calvinists to Catholicism by his unfailing spirit of charity and his engagement in controversy in a conciliatory spirit. Every door and every heart was at first closed against him. He was rejected with insult and threatened with death. But nothing could daunt or resist him, until eventually the Church burst forth into a Catholic spring. It is believed that under his influence 72,000 who had been persuaded to follow the teachings of Jean Calvin, returned to the Catholic Fold.

He was then compelled by the Pope to become Coadjutor Bishop of Geneva, and succeeded to the see in 1602, at the age of 36. Geneva had been home to John Calvin, who established in the 1550s a theocratic state run by stringent Protestant principles where there was much severity and harsh punishment for those who resisted Calvin's reforms.

It was into this harsh climate that Bishop de Sales exhibited an exceeding gentleness with which he received heretics and sinners. This treatment almost scandalized his friends, one of whom said to him,

“Francis of Sales will go to Paradise, of course; but I am not so sure of the Bishop of Geneva: I am almost afraid his gentleness will play him a shrewd turn.”

“Ah,” said the Saint, “I would rather account to God for too great gentleness than for too great severity. Is not God all love? God the Father is the Father of mercy; God the Son is a Lamb; God the Holy Ghost is a Dove—that is, gentleness itself. And are you wiser than God?”

Though poor, he refused provisions and dignities, and even the great see of Paris. He died at Avignon, 1622.

St Francis de Sales truly embodied the teaching of our Lord in today's Gospel to do God's will. His willingness to go to Chablais and then Geneva showed through enduring much suffering and

hardship his confidence in the Grace of the Gospel convert people back to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

May we be inspired by St. Francis' conviction as to fullness of Catholic teaching and at the same time grow in embodying his quality of gentleness and respect.

To do the will of God requires a love for the truth and a deep love for people – even those people who might oppose and hate us because of who we are and the One we represent, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This quote from St. Francis is one that can inspire us:

Never be in a hurry; do everything quietly and in a calm spirit. Do not lose your inner peace for anything whatsoever, even if your whole world seems upset”

He is council for one who lived daily in an upset world but because of his interior attitude displayed gentleness and charity in the service of his neighbor.