

## Called to holiness: the proposal of St. Francis de Sales and Pope Francis

Eugenio Alburquerque

The universal call to holiness is rooted in the most living and firm tradition of the Catholic Church. All of us in the Church are called to be saints, "for this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thess 4:3). Created in the image and likeness of God, the saint par excellence, we are called to holiness. To be able to imprint in our own being, the being of God, to make this divine image and likeness in which we have been constituted grow and develop in us, is the radical challenge and the most exciting enterprise that a man or woman can undertake.

This is the design and will of God. He wants our holiness. He wants believers to make our lives a path of sanctification, because He has chosen us, before the creation of the world, "to be holy and blameless in love" (Eph 1:4). The words of Jesus: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48), are still a demand addressed to his disciples. Christ is the foundation of all holiness. In his name we are his followers and imitators. He calls all to follow his way of holiness, to be holy as he is holy.

It is in this tradition, which begins with Christ, that St. Francis de Sales is inserted. His life and writings are an eminent testimony to this teaching which, in the 17th century, was rather obscured. It is the message he insistently addressed to his contemporaries. It represents one of the saint's most important contributions to Christian spirituality.

The sense and purpose of these pages is to present the invitation to holiness made to all Christians by the saintly bishop of Geneva and the pedagogical path that he traces, highlighting the relevance of the message in the light of the proposal that Pope Francis has been making in recent years.

### A revolutionary invitation

At the general audience held on 2 March 2011, Pope Benedict XVI, referring to St. Francis de Sales, pointed out that the holy bishop of Geneva, in his Introduction to the Devout Life, "made an invitation which in his time may have seemed revolutionary: to be completely of God, living fully the presence in the world and the duties of one's state".

Francis de Sales was, above all, a zealous, ardent pastor, an indefatigable apostle, ready to endure labours, hardships and sufferings for the Kingdom of God and the salvation of souls. All efforts seem to him to be too little to proclaim the Gospel and build up the Church of Christ. His missionary daring, his preaching, his spiritual direction, the reform of the diocese and the density of his writings are particularly significant in his enormous pastoral activity. And in it, in his various actions and interventions, that "revolutionary invitation", which is none other than the universal call to holiness, is very present. But the greatest impact, as Benedict XVI points out, is due to the publication of the Introduction to the Devout Life.

In a very beautiful and simple way he writes: "God, in the act of creation, commanded that each plant should bear fruit according to its own kind; in the same way he commands Christians, the living plants of his Church, to produce fruits of devotion, according to their own state and condition. Devotion must be practised differently by the gentleman, by the artisan, by the servant, by the prince, by the widow, by the maiden, by the married woman; and not only this, its practice must also be adapted to the strengths, occupations and duties of each state.... It is a mistake - or rather a heresy - to want to banish the devout life from the barracks of soldiers, from the workshop of artisans, from the court of princes, from the homes of married people... Wherever we are, we can and should aspire to the perfect life" (I I, 3).

At the time, it was a truly revolutionary proposal, a message that came as a very strong surprise to the contemporaries of the Bishop of Geneva. Perhaps because in the 17th century, as he himself warns, "the world defames devotion as much as it can, painting devout people in a gloomy, sad and melancholy mood, proclaiming that it breeds morose and unbearable characters" (I I, 2); or perhaps because in the saint's time it was thought that holiness was reserved for very few people, that it was the preserve of friars, nuns and blessed women, the preserve of those who withdrew and withdrew from the world.

Against this widespread opinion, St. Francis de Sales stands up and shows everyone that it is possible to live in the world, in the midst of the worries, vicissitudes and chores of life, and to be a saint. To those who do not think of it, to those who do not dare to start on the way, to those who claim difficulties and obstacles, he says: "I wish to show such that just as the mother-of-pearl is preserved in the midst of the sea without letting in a single drop of brackish water, and just as in the Caledonian islands there are springs of drinking water among the sea waves, and just as salamanders flit among flames without scorching their

wings, so a vigorous and constant soul can live in the world without being contaminated by worldly humours; It can give with sweetest springs of piety among the bitter waves of the century; it can fly among the flames of base appetites without the earthly fire touching its wings of pure desires of devotion" (I prologue). ).

It is not necessary, according to the Bishop of Geneva, to flee from the world, to abandon the cares and labours of life. Everywhere one can do God's will; in every situation one can live the perfection of charity; in every state one can walk towards holiness.

The thought that he sets out with such precision in the Introduction to the Devout Life, he insistently spreads in his spiritual letters. Thus, to Madame de Brûlart, at the beginning of her spiritual direction, he wrote: "You have a great desire for Christian perfection; it is the most generous desire you can conceive; encourage it, make it grow every day. The means of attaining perfection are different according to the diversity of vocations, for religious, widows and married people must all seek perfection, but not by the same means. The means at your disposal, being married as you are, are: to be united to God, to your neighbour and to all that depends on them" (L II, 267). For holiness, when it is true, does nothing harm; on the contrary, it perfects everything: "With it, the care of the family becomes more peaceful; the love of husband and wife, more sincere; the service of the prince, more faithful; and all occupations, in general, gentler and gentler" (I, I, 3).

In the same vein, he writes to Madame de Limojon: "I do not want an extravagant, confused, melancholy, annoying, sad devotion, but a sweet, gentle, pleasant, peaceful piety, and, in a word, a very free piety, which makes itself loved first of all by God and then by men" (L III, 59). And to the Duke of Bellegarde, who maintains his commitment to holiness "in the midst of the vanities of the Court", he says: "The world will admire you and, in spite of your bad disposition, will look upon you with honour, when it sees you in the midst of its palaces, galleries and salons, carefully keeping the rules of devotion, but a prudent, serious, strong, unwavering, noble and entirely gentle devotion" (L VI, 195).

The longing for holiness is the great desire he expresses so often in his letters. Thus, he writes to Madame d'Escrilles: "My soul desires for yours, the summit of holiness" (L VI, 175); "I will never cease to ask the divine Majesty for the perfection of your heart, which mine loves, desires and honours tenderly", he says to Madame de Peyzieu (L VI, 301); "It is not possible for me to tell you with what ardour my soul desires for yours, the perfection of the love of God .... May God keep you always in his holy hand and strengthen ever more this

generous and heavenly plan which he grants you to consecrate your whole life to him", he wrote to the Duke of Bellegarde (L VI, 212).

This message of St. Francis de Sales caused surprise and astonishment. But its impact and repercussions were also very great in Christian spirituality, particularly in lay spirituality. It was very well received in the Church and in the Tridentine reform, motivating and stimulating renewal from within and guiding a path of perfection. But perhaps the most important and significant thing is that this message is still very much alive and present in the Church.

### The Salesian message today

The revolutionary invitation of Francis de Sales constitutes today, especially since the Second Vatican Council, the ecclesial proposal. The constitution *Lumen Gentium* devotes chapter V to explaining "the universal call to holiness in the Church". According to the conciliar constitution, the Church is "unfailingly holy" because she has her origin in God, who is holy; because Christ loved her as his bride and gave himself for her in order to sanctify her. Therefore, all in the Church are called to holiness.

Vatican II clearly and firmly teaches that holiness is not a thing of the past, that it is not simply a matter for priests, friars and nuns, that all Christians are called to be saints in everyday life, including the laity: "It is the vocation of the laity to seek the kingdom of God, to manage temporal affairs and to order them according to God. They live in the world, that is to say, in each and every one of the duties and occupations of the world and in the ordinary conditions of family and social life, with which their existence is as it were interwoven. There they are called by God, so that, carrying out their own profession guided by the spirit of the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world as from within, in the manner of leaven".

The conciliar constitution on the Church repeats almost in the same words of St. Francis de Sales: "All the faithful of every state and condition are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity, and this holiness brings about a more humane standard of living even in earthly society"; and also: "All the Christian faithful are invited and should strive for holiness and perfection within their own state". According to conciliar teaching, the root of this vocation is Baptism. Clothed in Jesus Christ and indwelt by his Spirit, the Christian's commitment is to "manifest the holiness of his being in the holiness of all his actions".

The importance of this message was expressed by Pope Paul VI, who declared: "It is the most characteristic element of the entire Council's magisterium and, so to speak, its ultimate goal". In this sense, St. John Paul II also explained that the Second Vatican Council pronounced luminous words on the universal vocation to holiness, in such a way that it can be said that "this call has been the fundamental watchword entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council convoked for the evangelical renewal of Christian life".

Both pontiffs refer to St. Francis de Sales as a precursor and pioneer. Paul VI declares: "Among the recent Doctors of the Church, none better than Francis de Sales has known, with the profound intuition of his sagacity, how to foresee the deliberations of the Council. He will help by the example of his life, by the abundance of a pure and sound doctrine, by his sure method of spirituality, open to the Christian perfection of people of every state and condition".

John Paul II ends his reflection on the lay vocation in the post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles laici* with these words: "We can conclude by re-reading a beautiful page of St. Francis de Sales, who has so much promoted the spirituality of the laity. Speaking of devotion, that is, of Christian perfection or life according to the Spirit, he presents in a simple and splendid way the vocation of all Christians to holiness and, at the same time, the specific way in which each Christian achieves it". And the Pope then quotes the text of the third chapter of the first part of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, to which we have alluded.

Indeed, the Council's message is very much present in the words and writings of the post-conciliar popes: Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. At the beginning of the new millennium, Saint John Paul II proposed holiness of life as a fundamental programme for the Church: "Now is the time to propose this high standard of ordinary Christian life to everyone with conviction". It is the perspective in which the following of Christ, to which every Christian is called, is situated. And the Pope warned that recalling this elementary truth, placing it as the foundation of pastoral care at the beginning of the new millennium, might seem impractical to some. However, for him, placing the Church's entire pastoral programme under the sign of holiness means expressing the conviction that since Baptism is a true entrance into the holiness of God, it would be a contradiction in terms to be content with a life of mediocrity.

It would be a misunderstanding of the ideal of perfection to regard it as implying an extraordinary life. It is, rather, an ideal within everyone's reach. This is why St John Paul II stresses that now is the time to propose it to everyone. The life of the Christian community

must move in this direction, even if "the paths of holiness are personal and require a pedagogy of holiness, true and proper, capable of adapting to the rhythms of each person".

To strive for holiness is the greatest response to the challenges of the contemporary world. For this reason, according to Benedict XVI, we must not lose sight of the relevance of that great master of spirituality, St. Francis de Sales, "who bequeathed to his disciples the spirit of freedom, the true freedom, as the culmination of a fascinating and complete teaching on the reality of love"; he "reminds us that man carries inscribed in the depths of his being the longing for God and that only in Him does he find true joy and his fullest fulfilment".

It is also in this conciliar perspective that the magisterium of Pope Francis is situated. Since the beginning of his pontificate, he has been encouraging all Christians to allow themselves to be challenged by the Gospel, to live it radically, sincerely and joyfully. He explicitly and directly proposes holiness of life to the Christian community in the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate* (2018). As he states from the beginning of the document, this is its true aim: "To make the call to holiness resound once more, seeking to incarnate it in the present context, with its risks, challenges and opportunities. For each of us the Lord has chosen to be holy and blameless before him in love (Eph 1:4).

But Francis does not only proclaim the universal call to holiness. He also explains its true meaning, its challenges in the world and in the present time, looking at Christ and encouraging believers to confront themselves with his life and his word. In a detailed way, we will try to see and compare the invitation of St. Francis de Sales and the proposal of Pope Francis. In this way, the topicality of the message of the Bishop of Geneva can be better reflected.

### Holiness in everyday life

All of us, without exception, are called to holiness and we must attain it in everyday life. For St. Francis de Sales, Christian perfection is no stranger to barracks, shops, workshops, family homes or princely salons. It does not take anyone away from his daily tasks, his profession, his work, his relationships and commitments; on the contrary, it stimulates him to perform them with greater competence and perfection. God calls to holiness in the ordinary conditions of life and it is lived by managing one's temporal affairs and ordering them to God. It is in everyday life that He awaits us and where His will and His love are

manifested. Everyday life is the privileged place to meet Him, even when we men and women are tempted to look for Him elsewhere, in a different condition of life than our own. God manifests himself in real and concrete life.

He expressly declares in the prologue of the Introduction to the Devout Life that his intention is "to instruct those who live in cities, who live among their families or at court, and who, because of their condition, are obliged to profess a common life as regards the exterior". To them he wants to show that it is possible to live in the world and to undertake the path of "devotion". It is not a question, then, of seeking and choosing extraordinary means on the road to perfection to which the Bishop of Geneva invites them. It is enough to love God every day in the simplicity and routine of daily life and to do his will. For St. Francis de Sales, the mystical life is everyday life, with its foreseeable and unforeseeable events, its sufferings and its joys, its worries and its consolations, the natural life, but all of it permeated by the will of God. Francis de Sales does not deny the value or the possibility of mystical ecstasy; he speaks of it at length in his Treatise on the Love of God. However, for the saint, the touchstone of the true Christian life is the "ecstasy of life and action", that is to say, the ordinary Christian life, lived by each one according to his own condition, but rooted and sustained in the love of Christ.

In a very concrete way, St. Francis de Sales teaches that God's will is expressed in the commandments, in the duties of one's state, in the events that happen to us and weave our day. On the road to perfection, one must begin by fulfilling what God commands all Christians: "Devotion is nothing other than a general inclination and disposition of the spirit to do what pleases God... First of all, it is necessary to observe the general commandments of the law of God and of the Church, which are binding on every faithful Christian; without this, there can be no true devotion" (L II, 346-347). In this sense, when he begins to explain in the Introduction to the Devout Life the itinerary of devotion, he underlines the need to begin with the purification of the soul, which implies both purification from mortal sin and from the affection for sin. Only after this is it possible to turn to the exercise of the virtues.

But in addition to the general commandments, we must also fulfil the duties that our vocation and state impose on us, because they too are an expression of the divine will. As he explains in a simple and familiar way in his letters, the bishop has to visit his sheep, the married person has to fulfil his marital obligations towards his spouse and take care of the children, and the craftsman has to perform his work honestly.

On the way to holiness, it is important to be faithful in the daily routine, to face life; not to run away from its difficulties, from personal and social responsibilities, from monotony

and dryness. True love is forged in fidelity and constancy. Every day it is necessary to confirm the will to serve God entirely, without reserve, according to his plan, submitting ourselves to his will not only in extraordinary things, but also in the most ordinary: "Many people deceive themselves, because they prepare themselves only for the great adversities and remain without weapons, without strength and without the least resistance before the small ones; when it would be preferable to be less prepared for the great ones, which usually come to us very late in the day, and to be more prepared for the small ones which present themselves to us daily at every moment" (O V, 186).

That is why he so often invites us to practice the "little virtues", which lead to a lifestyle of honesty, serenity and deep joy, as well as the simple actions of visiting the sick, serving the poor, consoling the afflicted and the like. He wants to persuade us to take seriously in the spiritual life, "the little injuries and discomforts", "the daily losses of little importance", "the little occasions", "the slight details of ordinary charity", "the little pains and sufferings", because, "as such circumstances present themselves at every moment, here is an interesting means of accumulating spiritual riches" (I III, 35). The smallest of these aspects and details acquire an extraordinary value if they are lived with love. Everything depends on the intention we put into our actions: we are not more perfect or more pleasing to God because of the many penances and spiritual exercises, but because of the purity of the love with which we do them.

Perhaps because of his love of the simple, of daily honesty and fidelity, the Bishop of Geneva admired like no other the holiness of the modest village women, of the snow- and ice-covered mountain shepherds with whom he shared his hut, of the poor widows and peasants. He saw their lives as fertile and fruitful as the deep valleys, while those of so many great people in the world and in the Church were completely frozen!

It is in this perspective that Pope Francis' call to holiness in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate* is situated. The Pope stresses that the Holy Spirit pours holiness everywhere on the people of God. If St Francis de Sales referred to holiness in homes, workshops, shops, barracks, palaces, with the same simplicity and freshness Francis speaks of the "holiness next door: "I like to see holiness in the patient people of God: in the parents who raise their children with such love, in those men and women who work to bring home the bread, in the sick, in the elderly nuns who keep smiling. In that constancy to carry on day by day I see the holiness of the Church militant. This is often the holiness next door, of those who live close to us and are a reflection of God's presence or, to use another expression, the middle class of holiness.



Francis too, like the Bishop of Geneva, insists that to be saints it is not necessary to be bishops, priests, religious men and women, that we should not think that holiness is reserved to those who have the possibility of taking a distance from ordinary occupations to dedicate themselves to prayer, because: "we are called to be saints by living with love and offering our own witness in our daily occupations". Therefore, he writes: "Are you consecrated? Be holy by joyfully living your self-giving. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife... Are you a worker? Be holy by fulfilling your work with honesty and competence in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a father, grandmother or grandfather? Be holy by patiently teaching children to follow Jesus. Do you have authority? Be holy by fighting for the common good and renouncing your personal interests".

At the centre, love

Holiness lived in everyday life is accessible to all because it is nothing other than the love of God. Love is the secret of Salesian holiness and is also at the heart of Pope Francis' call to all Christians. In short, it is a matter of living one's daily occupations with love. Because in the saint's conception, as Lavelle points out, there is an identity between living and loving. According to Bremond, for St. Francis de Sales, "devotion" is synonymous with "perfection", and "perfection with "pure love".

With great simplicity he explains in his writings that holiness springs from the love of God and is manifested in love. It is a matter of accepting the love with which He loves us, of living in the love of the Father as Christ lived: "Be imitators of God, as dear children, and live in love as Christ loved you" (Eph 5, 1-2). For this reason, he insistently repeats that it is charity and charity alone that sets us on the path of perfection: "True and living devotion presupposes the love of God; or rather, it is nothing other than the true love of God... Devotion is nothing other than a spiritual agility or liveliness by means of which charity acts in us and we act in it with readiness and joy" (I I, 1).

Therefore, in order to undertake this path, we must first of all believe in Love; in God's love for us and in our love for God: "My dearest daughter, how much the Lord thinks of you and with what love he looks upon you! Yes, my dearest daughter, He not only thinks of you, but even to the last hair on your head... You must have no shadow of doubt that God looks

on you with love, for He looks with love on even the most horrible sinners in the world, at the least desire they show to be converted" (L VIII, 170-171).

At the heart of the Salesian conception of perfection and spirituality is love. It is the cornerstone of holiness. This is why the aim of the spiritual life is "to live for the glory of divine love"; and true spiritual progress exists when one progresses in love. The holy Bishop of Geneva thus roots and structures his spiritual doctrine in the purest Christian tradition, collected and synthesised by Saint Augustine in this way: "Incipient charity is incipient holiness; advanced charity is advanced holiness; great charity is great holiness, and perfect charity is perfect holiness".

For St. Francis de Sales, love comes first of all from God; it is generated by Him. God is love; out of love He calls us into existence and gives us His own Son as our Redeemer. In return for this love, He wants us to love Him and moves us to love Him, always respecting our freedom. When the soul decides to love and loves the Lord with all its being, love brings about the union of the soul with God. This union prompts it to conform itself fully to Him, to unite its loving will with that of the Beloved. And union leads to ecstasy, but to true ecstasy in the Lord, not to extravagance and vain imaginings: "True holiness is in the love of God and not in futilities of the imagination, such as raptures and raptures, which nourish self-love and lead away from obedience and humility. Pretending to be ecstatic is a delusion. Let us exercise ourselves in true gentleness and submission, in self-denial, in docility of heart, in love for what humbles us, in condescension towards others; that is the true and most amiable ecstasy of the servants of God" (L XI, 185).

Charity is not simply human love; it is supernatural charity in its principle and in its object. It proceeds from the love of God and leads to seeing and loving God in man. That is to say, for Francis de Sales, charity is a supernatural love by which we love our neighbour in God and for God: "When will the day come when we will be totally imbued with sweetness and gentleness towards our neighbour? When will we see their souls in the sacred bosom of our Saviour? He who looks at his neighbour outside that place is in danger of not loving him purely, constantly and equally. But there, in that place, who will not love him, who will not bear him, who will not suffer his imperfections, who will judge him wicked, who will find him troublesome? He is the neighbour, he is in the bosom and in the bosom of the divine Saviour, and there he is so loved and so kind, that the Lover dies of love for him" (L VII, 214).

If we let ourselves be loved by God and love Him, if we enter into the dynamism of divine love, we find in God's heart all that He loves. Love of God and love of neighbour are inseparable; they are one and the same commandment. Both live from the love that comes

from God, who first loved us. St. Francis de Sales expresses it very clearly and firmly: "The height of love for the divine goodness of the heavenly Father consists in the perfection of love for our brothers and companions" (T X, 11).

It is important to note the foundation of this inseparable unity between love of God and love of neighbour. According to St. Francis de Sales, it is found in the same divine unity, as Jesus teaches in the priestly prayer (cf. Jn 17): "God, who is one, loves unity and union; what is not united does not please him. He loves with sovereign love what is united and united; he is the enemy of disunity, because all that is disunited is imperfect, since disunity is caused by imperfection" (S IV, 61). The love that unites us in God, makes us love at the same time all the works of God, especially our neighbour for God's sake. Love of neighbour is a communion and extension of the infinite love of God.

But it is not only divine love that nourishes and nurtures neighbourly love; it also waters and vivifies all the virtues, because, according to St. Francis de Sales, all virtuous actions proceed from love and belong to love: "The virtuous actions of the children of God all belong to the sacred dilection; some, because they themselves, by their very nature, produce them; others, because it sanctifies them by its vital presence; the rest, by the authority and command which it has over the other virtues, from which it brings them into being" (T XI, 4). Love gives all our actions their true value and density.

Pope Francis also repeats with deep conviction and firmness that "holiness is nothing other than charity fully lived". And, quoting one of the catecheses of his predecessor Benedict XVI, he writes: "Holiness is measured by the stature that Christ attains in us, by the degree to which, with the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life after his". And he points out, concretely, five great manifestations of love of God and neighbour which he considers of particular importance for shaping a model of holiness in the face of the risks and limits of today's culture: endurance, patience and gentleness, joy and a sense of humour, boldness and fervour, in community, in constant prayer. They help us to centre life around the God who loves and sustains.

In the particular invitation to holiness that he makes to young people in the post-synodal exhortation *Christus vivit*, Francis emphasises, above all, the proclamation of God's love, which leads them: "Beyond all circumstances, I want to announce to all young people now the most important thing, the first thing, that which should never be kept silent... First of all I want to tell each one of you the first truth: God loves you. If you have already heard it, it doesn't matter, I want to remind you: God loves you. Never doubt it, no matter what

happens in your life. In any circumstance you are infinitely loved... For Him you are valuable, you are not insignificant, you matter to Him, because you are the work of His hands... It is a love that does not crush, it is a love that does not marginalise, that does not keep silent, a love that does not humiliate or overwhelm. It is the love of God, a love of every day, discreet and respectful, a love of freedom and for freedom, a love that heals and lifts up".

Earlier, Francis had also referred to Christian holiness in the area of marriage and the family. He wrote in *Amoris laetitia*: "A family communion well lived is a true path of sanctification in ordinary life and of mystical growth, a means of intimate union with God". And he concretely proposed to live a true spirituality of family love, "a spirituality of the bond inhabited by divine love". From a social perspective, he stresses that only in the practice and cultivation of divine love "will we make possible a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity open to all".

## Spirit of freedom

God is Love and Freedom; and this is how he created us. Forming us in his image and likeness, he wishes that "as in him all things be ordered in the soul by love and for love" (T I, 6). The important thing, then, is that our life and our action should be directed by love and have no other end than to love. That is why the exhortation to do "everything for love" returns again and again to the lips and pen of the holy bishop. It is the most beautiful expression of freedom. To live fully the love of God, he proposes the way and the spirit of freedom: "We must do everything by love and nothing by force; we must love obedience more than fear disobedience" (L II, 359).

Freedom is the key to true human greatness; it constitutes the content of the dignity of the person. It is through freedom that the human being is made and built up; he becomes a person and also becomes a Christian. This is how Francis de Sales puts it: "Freedom is the most precious thing for man, because it is the life of our being, because it is the most precious gift we can give, and it is also the last thing we give up, the thing we find most difficult to renounce. It is something so excellent that the devil cannot touch it; he prowls and prowls around it, but he cannot force it. God himself, who has given it to us, does not want to obtain it by force; when he asks us to give it to him, he demands that it be frankly and willingly. He has never forced anyone to serve him, nor will he ever do so" (S III, 335).

God respects the freedom of the person. He creates it not to petrify and violate it. He never imposes himself. He suggests, proposes, invites: "Grace acts so gently and so delicately takes possession of our hearts, that it does no injury to the freedom of our will; it moves with energy and finesse the springs of the spirit, and our free will suffers no violence; it has strength not to oppress but to soothe the heart; It uses holy violence, not to do violence, but to seduce our freedom; it works with decision, but so gently that the will is not broken under the weight of its action; it presses, but does not crush freedom; in the midst of so many requests, we will consent or resist as we please" (T II, 12).

This is how St. Francis de Sales expresses the spiritual path he proposes. He wants free men and women, not slaves in the service of God. He wants sons and daughters who freely accept his love and freely respond to it: "I like vigorous and strong souls, for otherwise, if a great affection entangles their hearts, disturbs and distracts them from loving recourse to God, it prevents the total abandonment and death of self-love. What does not belong to God is nothing to us" (L X, 216).

In a long letter to Madame de Brûlart, at the beginning of her spiritual direction, in which he points out to her the aspects she must take into account on the road to Christian perfection, he assures her that the most important thing in devotion is "to serve the Lord with joy and freedom". In a very simple way, he explains that devotion implies above all "a spiritual disposition to do what is pleasing to God". In other words, it is about the "expansion of the heart" in the sense in which the psalmist speaks: "I will run in the way of your commands when you enlarge my heart" (Ps 119:32). There are many, says the saint, who walk in the way of God; "but the devout run in it, and those who are devout to a high degree fly", precisely because their heart is enlarged, not constricted, they can run and fly unbound and unimpeded (cf. L II, 345-352). In almost the same words he repeats it in the Introduction to the Devout Life: "Good people who have not yet attained to devotion rise to God by their good deeds, but rarely and slowly and ponderously; devout souls, on the other hand, fly to God promptly and freely" (I I I, 1).

Spiritual progress is a journey of freedom, gratefully accepting and responding to God's gifts. In the unfolding of grace and divine love, human freedom always comes into play. The exercise of freedom leads us to follow Jesus, to seek God's will, to accept, fulfil and love it. In Salesian anthropology, freedom is a fundamental principle for the spiritual journey. The holy freedom of the children of God is for Francis de Sales the norm and programme of life. This is how he explained it to Madame de Chantal in the programmatic letter of his spiritual direction, to which we have alluded: "I leave you the spirit of freedom", explaining its meaning: "Not that which excludes obedience, for that is the freedom of the flesh, but that which excludes coercion and scruple or immoderate solicitude... Every good man turns away

from actions in which there is mortal sin and has no affection for them; that is a freedom necessary for salvation... But the freedom of which I speak is that of very dear children. It consists in a detachment of the human heart from all things in order to follow the recognised will of God" (L II, 352-370). In other words, the spirit of freedom to which the Bishop of Geneva refers is the attitude and the exercise of filial freedom.

Understood in this way, this is the true norm of conduct that St. Francis de Sales follows and proposes: that in everything "holy freedom reigns and that we have no law or urgency except that of love" (L III, 184). The supreme norm of Christian life and the cornerstone of holiness is love. And the freedom that God gives us is freedom for love. To follow the spirit of freedom is to love according to the spirit, for love is the life of the soul. It is a matter of living accompanied and guided by love, of loving God very much, and for God's sake, all creatures. Everything in our life is subjected and ordered to the love of God.

The spirit of freedom leads us to live in God, in his love, it guides us to seek, above all things, his will. To do everything for the love of God is to let Him guide and govern us, to put ourselves in His hands and let Him do; and it also includes leaving our will and our freedom in His hands. We are never freer than when we let God dispose of us: "Our free will is never so free as when it becomes the slave of the divine will; it never has so much life as when it dies to itself and never has so much death as when it lives to itself" (T XII, 10).

Pope Francis also refers to this inner freedom that leads to the love of God, stressing its importance on the path to holiness. For him, there is no greater freedom than "to let oneself be led by the Spirit, to renounce calculating and controlling everything, and to allow Him to enlighten us, to guide us, to orient us, to impel us where He wills".

Francis presents the universal call to holiness in the light of the beatitudes, which are "the Christian's identity card". And in explaining the first, "blessed are the poor in spirit", he relates it to the holy indifference proposed by St. Ignatius of Loyola and so widely used by St. Francis de Sales. For him it means the passage of our will "to live completely in the divine will; it is then that we neither know nor wish to desire anything, but abandon ourselves totally and without reserve to that will of divine Providence and soak ourselves in it that we no longer see it, but that it is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3, 3), where it lives, no longer itself, but the will of God lives in it" (T IX, 13).

Within the framework of the beatitudes, the Pope also points out some characteristics of holiness in today's world, among them boldness. For the Pope, holiness is *parresia*, which, as he explains, is audacity, evangelising drive, enthusiasm; it is acting with freedom. Apostolic *parresia* expresses "the freedom of an existence that is open because it is available to God and to others". This is the meaning of Salesian freedom, the freedom urged and urged by love. With Pope Francis, one could say that this spirit of freedom constitutes the manifestation of the true "seal of the Spirit of God".

Joy, the path to holiness

According to St. Francis de Sales there is an intimate relationship between devotion, love, freedom and joy. True devotion is sweet, joyful and kind. As we have insisted, according to the saint, devotion consists in the love of God; and in love is not only the source, but also the fullness of joy. The important thing in the spiritual life is to seek and love God's will: "We must love what God wills and, having recognised it, seek to do it joyfully" (L III, 18-22).

He strongly recommends submitting one's own will to the divine will with freedom and joy: "I do not want a devotion that is extravagant, confused, melancholy, annoying, sad, but sweet, gentle, pleasant, peaceful, very free, which makes itself loved first by God and then by men" (L III, 59-60); "a devotion that is prudent, strong, unshakable and entirely joyful" (L VI, 195).

Joy constitutes the true spirit of devotion, the soul of holiness. To be a Christian is "joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14. 17), because, as St Thomas explains, love of charity is followed by joy. When the heart is in God, one cannot but be happy and joyful. Sadness, on the other hand, is one of the great enemies of devotion. It is necessary to turn away from it, to remain in holy peace and to fill the heart with the love of God; without it, our hearts are without life and our life without happiness: "How can anyone be sad who serves Him who will be our joy for ever?"

From the conviction that service to God fills the human heart with joy, he writes to one of his daughters tormented by restlessness and sadness: "I cannot understand how she lets this great sadness enter her heart, when she has lived for a long time in the bosom of his mercy and is consecrated to his love... These sad and melancholy thoughts are put to us by the enemy with the sole intention of tiring and annoying us" (L VIII, 417). The enemy uses sadness to tempt the good, just as he tries to make the wicked rejoice in their sins: "Sadness troubles the soul, sows restlessness in it, produces foolish fears, kills the taste for prayer, dulls the understanding, deprives the soul of counsel, resolution, judgment and

courage, and abates strength; in a word, it is like harsh winter, which withers the beauty of the landscape and covers all animals, depriving the spirit of softness and closing it to the development of all its faculties" (I IV, 12).

From the conception of joy as the source and fullness of love, the invitation to walk always joyfully is constant in the recommendations of Francis de Sales: "Keep your heart enlarged, unburden it often in the arms of Providence... Live cheerfully. Be of good cheer, let us serve God well, fixed on his sacred side, let nothing disturb us" (L XI, 143-144); "Live cheerfully, all filled with God and his holy love" (L X, 216); "Live very cheerful, very lively, very united to the Saviour; and may the divine goodness deign to bless the holy unity He has created in us and sanctify it more and more" (L VI, 360); "Live generously and joyfully in Him who is our only joy" (L VII, 24).

God wants us to be joyful. That is why the saint insists: "Go joyfully on the heavenly path on which God has set you. Be joyful in the Lord and keep your heart in peace" (L III, 53); "Keep your heart full of love, of a sweet, peaceful and serene love... Live joyfully, for you are entirely dedicated to the immortal joy, which is God himself" (L IV, 79); "Do not lose the spirit of holy joy in all your actions and words, for by it you will give comfort to all who see you, so that they may glorify God, which is our only claim" (L IV, 57). On the road to perfection we must walk joyfully trusting in the Lord, in spite of our imperfections. Joy and gladness must accompany all our daily actions, even the most ordinary ones. But, in a special way, joy must be maintained in moments of trial and inner suffering, in the sorrows and afflictions that are never lacking: "Keep your heart open before God, always be joyful in his presence. He loves us, He wants us... Let us be wholly and only His; let us love Him even if darkness and storms surround us and the waters of bitterness come up to our necks. If He sustains us, we have nothing to fear" (L III, 193).

By joy, the Bishop of Geneva meant many things: the joy of living manifested in everyday life; the acceptance of events as the concrete path of God's will; trust in the positive in people; the deep sense of the good and the conviction that it is always stronger than evil. But in his teaching, the true and deepest joy lies above all in coming to "contemplate the face of God so desirable, or rather, the only thing desirable for souls". In such a way that "our hearts feel a thirst that cannot be quenched by the delights of mortal life, of which the most desirable, if moderate, do not satisfy, and if excessive, stupefy" (T III, 10).

Feeling keenly the desire for God, he exclaims: "What joy we shall feel in heaven, when we shall see the beloved of our hearts as an infinite sea whose waters are composed



of perfection and goodness! Just as deer, long harassed and persecuted, when they come thirsty to the clear stream of a spring, experience the freshness of the waters, so also "our hearts, having reached the living fountain of divinity after so much sighing and striving, will acquire through pleasure all the perfections of their Beloved and will taste full joy in the pleasure of his sight, saturating themselves with immortal adventures" (T V, 1).

Christian joy is situated beyond success, beyond the fact that things go well for us; beyond the noise, the hubbub, the frenzy; beyond the things, the consumptions and pastimes; beyond our sensitivity and affectivity. It is Easter joy. It comes not from our triumphs, but from the triumph of the Risen One, who, with his self-giving love, gives us life in abundance and shows us the way to truth and happiness. And this, for the Bishop of Geneva, is the root and source of true joy: how can we not live joyfully, if we are certain that God loves us and saves us! We are the work of a God who ceaselessly wants to communicate his love to us: "Live joyfully, dear child; God loves you and will give you the grace to love him; it is the supreme joy of the soul in this life and in the eternal life" (L V, 180). Christian joy is rooted in daily life, but it is a joy centred on Jesus. It comes from Him, He accompanies it and it is shared with Him.

Joy constitutes one of the most important keys to its orientation towards holiness. It is not only necessary to avoid and reject sadness; one must always be joyful: "Frequently awaken in your spirit the spirit of joy and gentleness, and be sure that this is the true spirit of devotion" (L III, 112).

Joy in the Christian life, especially on the path to holiness, is also one of the most characteristic traits of Pope Francis from the very beginning of his pontifical ministry. Already in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), he began: "The joy of the Gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who encounter Jesus. Those who allow themselves to be saved by him are freed from sin, from sadness, from inner emptiness, from isolation. With Jesus Christ joy is always born and reborn". According to Francis, the Gospel "insistently invites us to joy" and we attain it "thanks to the encounter with God's love". For "we become fully human when we allow God to take us beyond ourselves...". It is God's love that gives us back the meaning of life ...".

Holiness does not make us less human, for it is the encounter of our weakness with the power of grace. That is why, in his exhortation on holiness in today's world, he warns: "Do not be afraid of holiness. It will not rob you of strength, life or joy. On the contrary, because you will become what the Father intended you to be when he created you and you

will be faithful to your own being. And the Pope quotes Leo Bloy's well-known dictum: "There is only one sadness in life, that of not being a saint".

Francis sees joy as one of the important notes in the call to holiness in the world; and he wants to make it resonate in the framework of the beatitudes, defending that the saint is capable of living with joy and a sense of humour: "If we allow the Lord to bring us out of our shell and change our lives, then we can make real what Saint Paul asked: Rejoice in the Lord always; I repeat, rejoice (Phil 4:4)". The risen Jesus gives the Christian the assurance that his sadness will turn into joy. It is an inner security, a hopeful serenity that, although "there are hard moments, times of the cross, no one can destroy the supernatural joy that adapts and transforms itself, and always remains at least as an outbreak of light born of the personal certainty of being infinitely loved beyond everything".

God wants us to be positive, grateful and not too complicated: "We receive so much from the Lord for us to enjoy, that sometimes sadness has to do with ingratitude, with being so closed in on oneself that one becomes incapable of recognising God's gifts".

Referring specifically to young people, in the great proclamation he makes to them of God's love, he assures them at the same time that "his love is not sad, but pure joy that is renewed when we allow ourselves to be loved by him". Because the love of the Lord neither humiliates nor overpowers: "it is so real, so true, so concrete, that it offers us a relationship full of sincere and fruitful dialogue". And in his apostolic letter to consecrated persons in the year dedicated to consecrated life (dated 30 November 2014), he proposes to them in a special way to be "witnesses of joy". Francis confesses that what he really hopes for in this year of grace is that what he has already said on other occasions becomes a reality: "Where there are religious there is joy", because in religious life "we are called to experience and demonstrate that God is capable of fulfilling our hearts and making us happy without needing our happiness elsewhere... May there be no sad faces or dissatisfied people among us, because a sad following is a sad following".

## The need for a guide

After explaining, in the Introduction to the Devout Life, what devotion consists of, its properties and excellence, and emphasising that it is suitable for all kinds of states and professions, St. Francis de Sales underlines the need for a guide to initiate and progress in it: "When the young Tobias was ordered to go to Ragés, he said, 'I do not know the way.

Go, then," his father replied, "and find a man to go with you (Tob 5, 2-4). I say the same to you, Philothea, do you really want to enter into devotion? Look for a good man to guide you and lead you; this is the most important recommendation" (I I, 4).

According to St. Francis de Sales, in order to enter and progress along the path of Christian perfection, it is necessary to allow oneself to be guided; that is to say, one needs direction, guidance, spiritual accompaniment. He does not base his conviction solely on his own experience. He also draws on the experience and witness of St. Catherine of Siena, St. Aquinas, St. Louis, St. Teresa and especially St. John of Avila: "No matter how hard you seek," says Blessed Avila, "you will never find the will of God so surely as by the path of that humble obedience so recommended and practised by all the ancient devotees" (I I, 4).

Since, according to the saint, the perfection of the Christian life consists "in the conformity of our will with that of God, who is the sovereign rule and law of our actions" (O V, 185), it is important to understand that this can only be achieved through human mediations; and among these, Francis de Sales emphasises the mediation of spiritual direction, which tends precisely to the discernment of the divine will and is the surest way. And this is what the Bishop of Geneva exhorts: to embrace the holy will of God without reserve and with joy, because "God loves those to whom he can say with all their heart and in all circumstances: Thy will be done" (L IV, 75).

For those who want to enter the path of perfection, God calls them to submit their own will to His loving plan, to His divine good pleasure. This is the greatest science to which we can aspire and which, therefore, we can hardly attain alone: "The true and holy science consists in letting God do and undo in us and in all things what He pleases, without any other will and choice, reverencing in profound silence what, because of our weakness, the understanding is unable to understand, because His designs may sometimes be hidden, but they are always just" (L XI, 186). In spiritual direction, then, it is a matter of helping to unveil God's designs, to make the understanding understand what it cannot understand on its own, to let God be God in us.

In the thought of St. Francis de Sales, the person, in moving towards love, in realising God's will, realises himself and, in realising himself, liberates himself. So, in the end, spiritual direction and guidance is necessary to be able to undertake the first and fundamental task that the human person has to develop: the task of self-fulfilment. It is necessary in order to become what we are.

Instead of getting lost in labyrinths of fictions and devout imaginations, spiritual direction leads to the recognition and acceptance of one's own identity and vocation. The sense of its necessity appears especially when it is appreciated as a life-long orientation and helps the development of one's vocation. Spiritual direction looks at the whole person who seeks and seeks to fulfil God's will in one's own life, and who fulfils and realises it in one's own existence.

But in order to let oneself be accompanied and guided by others, simplicity and humility are necessary. There are souls, she tells her first daughters of the Visitation, "so sure of themselves that they want to be led only by the Spirit of God, and it seems to them that all they imagine are inspirations of the Holy Spirit, who takes them by the hand and guides them in everything they want to do". To prove their deception, he gives them the example of St. Paul, who, called upon by Jesus to undertake the path of conversion, is nevertheless entrusted to Ananias by Jesus himself, so that he may instruct him, tell him and teach him all that he must do. And the holy doctor argues: "Has there ever been a more special vocation than that of St Paul to whom Our Lord Himself spoke to convert him... And are we to believe that we are more favoured by God than St Paul, thinking that He Himself wants to lead us without the mediation of any creature?"

Sensing the importance of guidance and, in particular, of the spiritual director, the saint encourages us to seek him and to ask the Lord for him, and then to open our hearts to him in all sincerity, simplicity and trust. And he ends the fourth chapter of the first part of the Introduction with this recommendation: "I tell you again, ask God for it, and when you have obtained it, bless his divine Majesty; be constant, without looking for someone else, and go forward simply, humbly and confidently, for you will make an extremely happy journey".

One of the most frequent insistences in Pope Francis' magisterial interventions has been on the importance and necessity of spiritual accompaniment in the Christian community. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he referred to personal accompaniment from the pastoral perspective of evangelisation and affirmed: "The Church will have to initiate her brothers and sisters - priests, religious and laity - in this art of accompaniment, so that all may always learn to remove their sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3, 5)... Spiritual accompaniment must lead more and more to God in whom we can attain true freedom".

This is the true purpose of spiritual accompaniment: to lead to an encounter with God's love. And it is in this sense that the Pope's words can be understood: "We need men and women who, from their experience of accompaniment, know the processes where prudence, the

capacity for understanding, the art of waiting, docility to the Spirit prevail, in order to take care among all the sheep entrusted to us from the wolves who try to break up the flock.... Only through respectful and compassionate listening can one find the paths of genuine growth, awaken the desire for the Christian ideal, the yearning to respond fully to God's love and the longing to develop the best that God has sown in one's life".

From a concrete pastoral perspective, Francis' reference to personal accompaniment in *Amoris laetitia* is also important. He refers to accompaniment on the path of preparation for marriage, in the first years of married life and in situations of crisis, anguish and difficulties. In all of them it is a matter of proclaiming the Gospel of the family today and "to make people experience that the Gospel of the family is a joy that fills the heart and the whole of life".

In the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christus vivit*, he refers in a special way to the spiritual accompaniment of young people: "Young people need to be respected in their freedom, but they also need to be accompanied". And the qualities that the pope asks of those who carry out the pastoral task of accompaniment are very significant: "That they be authentic Christians committed to the Church and to the world; that they constantly seek holiness; that they understand without judging; that they actively listen to the needs of young people and can respond to them with gentleness; that they be very kind and self-aware; that they recognise their limits and know the joy and suffering that every spiritual journey entails".

## The great challenge

To read and listen today to St. Francis de Sales' message of holiness for all in the light of Pope Francis' words means not only to contemplate and admire the closeness and timeliness of the holy Bishop of Geneva, but also to recognise holiness as the great challenge of the Christian life.

St. Francis de Sales is admired as a saint who is very close to us. According to Louis Lavelle, "of all the saints, there is none who seems to me to be more involved in the world and, as a consequence, closer to us than St. Francis de Sales". Indeed, he was a man involved and committed in his time; a time of dizzying changes, ideological, political, spiritual, a time of war and violence, of intolerance and intransigence. He was a man representative of the new age, the Modern Age, characterised by the great aspiration for

liberation from political and religious oppression; a modern man, who drank from the deep sources of the Renaissance and sought the integration of faith and humanism; a man passionate about culture and bringing culture to the people. And he was especially a pastor full of evangelical parresia, boldness and creativity, capable of discerning the signs of the times and the most suitable means for evangelisation.

From this apostolic audacity and from his great disposition to discernment, when the aspiration to "devotion" was simply addressed to "those who turned away from the world" and embarked on "paths of absolute retreat", Francis de Sales launched the surprising message of an intra-worldly holiness, holiness in daily life, in one's own state, condition and profession.

Although his life takes place in a specific place and time, in a specific social, cultural and political context, his message has a much wider resonance. Today this resonance comes to us in the words of Pope Francis, who, taking up the message of the Christian tradition, so vividly proclaimed by St Francis de Sales, tells all Christians that "God wants us to be saints and does not expect us to settle for a mediocre, watered-down, liquefied existence".

As in the time of the Bishop of Geneva, holiness does not appear today as an ideal of life for the men and women of our time and of our world. Far from being attractive, it is something that "goes very much against the grain with respect to what is customary, to what is done in society" and "the world is leading us towards another way of life". As was the case in the 17th century, holiness is a great challenge for the Church today.

But it is not only necessary to propose it, but to make it resonate. The horizon of holiness requires deep convictions, a critical spirit in the face of the signs of the times, mystical rootedness, practical sense and apostolic audacity. And perhaps it is necessary above all that, as St. Francis de Sales did, the invitation and call to holiness be accompanied by a concrete pedagogy of holiness, capable of adapting to the rhythms of people.

The Introduction to the Devout Life is a great book of religious pedagogy. The author addresses it to Philothea, the symbolic name by which he wants to designate every person, man or woman, "lover or in love with God" (I, Preface), whatever their situation in the world. He seeks to motivate and convince by means of warnings, advice, admonitions, recommendations, exercises and teachings in order to "convert Philothea's simple desire

into a full resolution", by means of "clear and intelligible words". And by using comparisons taken from real life, examples, images and metaphors, he achieves what is really important: to make virtue, perfection and holiness attractive. For it would have been useless to offer Christians an ideal of perfection without at the same time inspiring in them the desire and the means to achieve it. The courage and the merit of St. Francis de Sales lie precisely in showing true holiness, without lowering it or watering it down, and presenting it with conviction as accessible and lovable to all.

And this is the bold claim of Pope Francis to propose holiness to all Christians and to incarnate it in one's own state and condition. It stems from the conviction that God wants us to be holy and that, in asking us for holiness, he asks us for everything, offering us, at the same time, "the true life, the happiness for which we were created". Therefore, "promoting the desire for holiness" means "sharing a happiness that the world cannot take away from us".