

Saturday: The Foundations of Mission with St. Francis de Sales

Saint Francis de Sales, missionary:
"The charity of Christ urges us!"

Pilgrim friends,

The saint who accompanies us on this first day of pilgrimage is Saint Francis de Sales. He takes us to the beautiful Savoyard hills of the Chablais, where he will carry out an extraordinary missionary activity among the Protestants; through his life, he makes us enter into the theme of our 44th Pentecost pilgrimage, and shows us how "*the charity of charities is the apostolate*"².



Portrait of Saint Francis de Sales, anonymous artist

Some elements of his life

On September 9, 1594, at the age of 27 and very young ordained, he responded to the call of his bishop and left the city of Annecy to go to conquer the souls locked up in the Protestant heresy for many years. The mission was very risky, persecutions were rife, and several missionaries had already failed in this task. On the way, François stops at the family castle and is even refused the blessing of his father, who has every reason to believe that he will lose his life there.

To follow St. Francis de Sales, one must lengthen one's pace and not delay, for the young priest spares no effort. Dear pilgrims, in a few hours you may begin to feel the first am-pouls, despite your heavy walking shoes and good pairs of socks. François, on the other hand, does not go through Decathlon, his shoes are very ill-suited to crisscross the whole country for four years,

1. 2 Cor 5:14.

2. Père d'Elbée, *Croire à l'amour*, Éditions Pierre Téqui, 2007.

in the rain, in the snow or in the sun. In winter, he was found walking barefoot because he no longer fit into his shoes because of frostbite. It was said that we could follow him because of the blood he left behind, like Tom Thumb. Think of him, think of his ardent missionary zeal, when this evening, just before arriving at the bivouac, you will take the famous Côte de Choisel, dreaded by connoisseurs: it looks very much like that of the Château des Allinges that the saint sometimes climbed in the evening on all fours because he was so exhausted. You will then say to yourself like Isaiah: " *How beautiful are the footsteps of the messenger, the one who proclaims peace, who brings good news, who proclaims salvation, and comes to say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'*"³."

We will retain 5 teachings of Francis de Sales on the mission; Be very attentive, to help you concentrate despite the hubbub in Paris, I have prepared a quiz at the end of the guidebook, so pay close attention to these 5 points, but also to the 3 "offensives" (underlined in the text), the "works of mercy" and the quotes.

1st point: the mission is not easy

In his first year of mission, Francis obtained only **one conversion**. The doors closed on his way and it must be admitted that the three or four inhabitants of Thonon who had remained Catholic remained very timid. "*In the regime of souls*," Francis told us, "*we need a cup of knowledge, a barrel of prudence and an ocean of patience*."

For four years, François was subjected to ambushes, stone throwing, threats. He was nearly murdered several times. And he calmly replied to his anxious father, the Baron de Sales, that a descendant of a knight ought not to be so painful for so little. Nothing can stop him! In fact, the opposite is true. The more threatened he is, the more he throws himself *like a sheep into the midst of wolves*. After a year of vexations and, it may be said, failures, instead of being discouraged, he decided to leave the garrison of the Allinges to settle in Thonon without any protection. Alone in this new refuge, invaded several times by brigands armed to the teeth, Francis knows that he is protected by all the saints in heaven that his opponents refuse.

3. Is 52:7.

4. Mt 10:16.

Why so much trouble? But that's precisely what the inhabitants of Chablais were saying to themselves when, in the early morning, they found him hanging from a tree, his body frozen and inanimate. He had indeed taken refuge on a branch to avoid being bitten by the hungry wolves and, in order not to fall into his sleep, he had clung to it with his belt. The poor priest could no longer count his nights outside... **His indefatigable zeal will be his first offensive to open a first breach in the walls of hardened souls.** In spite of the hardness of hearts and the confinement of intelligences, our heretics must admit that they are not dealing with a mercenary but with the *Good Shepherd who gives his life*⁵. The voice of Christ begins to resound in the fold: "*The sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*"⁶ »

Fellow pilgrims, why do you go to so much trouble for the mission? Well, quite simply because "*the Charity of Christ urges us*"⁷ ! **God loves and wants to be loved by men.** Christ is the light of the world and it is up to us, children of his Church, to spread it throughout the world. Christ's grace passes through the configuration of his disciple to his passion. Like St. Paul, Francis could say: "*Often on foot on the roads, with the dangers of the rivers, the dangers of the robbers, the dangers of my brethren, the dangers of the heathen, the dangers of the city, the dangers of the desert, the dangers of the sea, the dangers of false brethren. I have known fatigue and sorrow, often lack of sleep, hunger and thirst, often lack of food, cold and lack of clothing*"⁸ : all this out of love for Christ.

2nd point: mission comes from charity, which spreads through itself

When you love, you can't help but say it and transmit this joy. Like a child who explodes in the middle of class to announce that his mother is expecting a baby. He had to keep this secret to himself, but it's too hard, it has to come out. **Joy spreads by itself.** Two spouses cannot keep their love just to themselves, they want to pass it on to their children, and when they cannot, it is suffering. God is like this, God does not keep his perfection to Himself, therefore He loves

5. Jn 10:11.

6. Jn 10:27.

7. 2 Cor 5:14.

8. 2 Cor 11:26.

He creates; and his creature, *in his image and likeness*,⁹ **is animated by the same law which does not keep to itself what it loves, but which wishes to communicate it.** Francis said: "*The world is born of love, it is sustained by love, it goes towards love and it enters into love.*" Thus, **the primary motivation of the missionary is to transmit what he loves (i.e. God) to those he loves (i.e. men).** As Christ says, "*By the love you have for one another you will be known to be my disciples.*"¹⁰

Francis, who would be nicknamed the doctor of God's love, was burned by the inner fire of charity. He cannot be satisfied with living his faith just for himself, in the warmth, seeing such desolation in the hills overlooking Annecy. The inhabitants of Chablais, like our contemporaries, were satisfied with their lives. They were convinced that it was good to live outside the sacraments of the Church, that there was no point in receiving Communion or going to confession. But gradually the doors will open because Francis' zeal does not leave anyone indifferent. Why does he take so much trouble to convert us, they said to themselves? From what source does he draw so much love? Francis answers: "*Mercy and the Eucharist, which you reject by your heresy, are the source of my zeal.* Yes, **pilgrim friends, the driving force of the mission is love,** as Pius XI said:

*"The foundation of the apostolate is nothing other than the exercise of Christian charity, which binds all men."*¹¹ And this affirmation finds its echo in the Second Vatican Council: "*The precept of charity, which is the greatest commandment of the Lord, urges all Christians to work for the glory of God through the coming of his kingdom, and for the communication of eternal life to all men.*"¹²

3rd point: The first tool of the missionary is to manifest this charity

" *It is by charity that the walls of Geneva must be shaken, by charity that it must be invaded, by charity that it must be recovered ,*" said St. Francis de Sales. He repeated incessantly: " **Nothing by force, all by love.** Before he was this formidable polemicist shaking the citadels

9. Gen 1:27.

10. Jn 13:35.

11. Pius XI, Letter to the Argentine Episcopate on Catholic Action, 4 February 1931, *Documentation catholique*, vol. 28 (1932), cols. 393–395.

12. Vatican II, *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, No. 3.

Protestants of Thonon and Geneva, he visited the sick and poor of Chablais. He was the **minister of the corporal works of mercy which are authentic missionary means**, and of which the following is the traditional list: *feeding the hungry; giving drink to the thirsty; clothing the naked; welcoming pilgrims; assisting the sick; visiting prisoners; burying the dead*.¹³ A beautiful lesson: if you do not yet feel ready to do direct evangelization, nothing prevents you from already being a missionary through these corporal works of mercy, for example by joining the marauding of your parish.

Thus, **his charity was his second offensive** to attack the Protestant citadel. She finds herself in his great courtesy and delicacy. The missionary who only pronounces truths, but without loving his interlocutor and without manifesting this love, will never convert.

"Men," said St. Francis de Sales, *"are won by love more than by rigor, we must not only be good, but very good."* He knew how to adapt his speech to soldiers as well as to the bourgeoisie or pastors. He said: *"One speaks one way to young apprentices and in another way to old companions,"* and again: *"A spoonful of honey attracts more flies than a barrel of vinegar."*

4th point: no charity without truth

But you will tell me, dear pilgrims, that my program to convert heretics seems very naïve. Just love... I will tell you that love is essential **but not enough**. Francis de Sales, after a few months, saw how closed hearts remained. Every evening when he was able to return to Les Allinges, the castellan found him at prayer for a good hour. Then he shut himself up in his room and wrote for a great part of the night. Then a small package was sent to the presses of Chambéry to be printed and our good priest discreetly slipped **his famous tracts, which are called the *Controversies***, under the doors to reach those who did not dare to go to his preaching. Thus, **after his courageous zeal and great charity, these Controversies were his third offensive**. Francis was not content with loving, but he preached the truth. Without concession, in a firm tone, he asked them:

"Can one make one's salvation in the Catholic Church? If so, why did you

13. The origin of these corporal works of mercy, except for the last one added later, is in Mt 25:34-40.

denied this Church, it was enough to reform it as was done at the Council of Trent? Otherwise, how can we conceive that all Christians before Luther were damned?

This is very important, dear pilgrims: to want the good of one's neighbour is to want first of all for him the light and understanding of the truth, the foundation of all good. The missionary has the courage to affirm the truth, which is that of Christ, and which alone can save. This is also a work of mercy and love, and this is well recalled in the traditional list **of the seven spiritual works of mercy: teaching the ignorant ; to pray to God for the living and for the dead ; advising those who are in doubt ; to forgive offenses; to console the afflicted; to bear patiently with annoying persons ; warn sinners.**

See, dear pilgrims, this link between charity and truth: on the one hand, **"a truth that is not charitable is not true"**, as St Francis de Sales said; but on the other hand, love of neighbour cannot be lived in the indifference of one's error. His salvation, his eternal happiness, is at stake!

After four years, his success was total. He collected thousands of abjurations and was able to send many priests to reopen the churches that were overflowing.

5th point: the sinews of the disciple's war is formation and prayer

Dear pilgrims, you will tell me that you are not a Doctor of the Church; but Francis was not one at the age of 27 either. You will tell me that you are not sufficiently formed, that your faith is shaky. Look at Francis: he had Bellarmine's controversies on his bedside table, he worked tirelessly on the Holy Scriptures. He studied, he trained. He also took great care of his soul, for one cannot give to others what one does not have oneself. **We will go into these points in more detail tomorrow.** For the time being, dear pilgrims, remember this: to be a Christian is to transmit the message of Christ. **The mission is never an excuse** not to pray or not to be formed. **On the contrary, the mission impels you to pray and to form yourselves more...** and the more you pray, the more you will love the truth, the more

" You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth"14 .

14. Acts 1:8.

Short quiz

1. What are the five points to remember? (5 points)
2. What are the three offensives? (10 points)
3. Give two quotations from St. Francis. (5 points)
4. Name at least two works of mercy. (5 points)

Quotes

The sweetness of virtue, the amiable childhood of the heart, and the tenderness of love... Escorted by her brilliant conquests: seventy-two thousand heretics subject to the Church by the ascendancy of her charity: a whole Order of handmaidens of the Lord, conceived in her love, realized by her heavenly genius; so many thousands of souls won over to piety by his teachings so sure and merciful. God gave it to his Church, to console her for the blasphemies of heresy who went about preaching that the Roman faith was sterile for charity; he placed this true evangelical minister in front of the followers of Calvin; **and the ardour of the charity of Francis de Sales split the ice of these obstinate hearts.**

Dom Prosper Guéranger, *L'Année liturgique. The Christmas Season*, t. II, feast of Saint Francis de Sales (29 January)

The proclamation is expressed in the whole life of the Christian, in all situations. It must be proclaimed by the word, without which the apostolic value of good deeds diminishes or escapes. It must be proclaimed by works of charity, a living witness to the faith, not forgetting the works of spiritual mercy alongside those that are material. Let no reservation be expressed in associating the word of Christ with charitable actions, because of a misunderstood sense of respect for the convictions of others. **One does not do charity enough by leaving one's brothers and sisters in ignorance of the truth; one does not do charity by feeding the poor, or by visiting the sick, by providing them with human resources, and by hiding from them the Word that saves.** " *And whatever ye may say or do, let it always be in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.* (Col 3:17).

Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, § 21 (1975)

The love of God, which imposes itself on us as a duty, requires that, to the extent of our strength, [...] we submit to the dominion of our most loving Redeemer as many men as possible. [...] Christ proclaimed that his disciples would have the peculiar distinguishing feature of loving one another; but can we show our neighbor a greater and more remarkable charity than by rescuing him from the darkness of superstition and instructing him in the true faith of Christ? This mode of charity surpasses the other works and manifestations of charity as much as the spirit prevails over matter, heaven over earth, eternity over time.

Pius XI, Encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae*, 1926, § 12 and 13

Love all men, even your enemies; not because they are your brothers, but that they may be your brothers: so that you may always burn with brotherly love, either for him who is already your brother, or for your enemy, so that by dint of love you may make him your brother. [...] If you live well, your love makes a brother of the one who is your enemy. But you love someone who does not yet believe in Christ, or who, if he believes in Christ, believes in the manner of demons, you reproach him with the vanity of his error. But you love him, and love him with brotherly love: he is not yet your brother, but you love him in such a way that he becomes one.

St. Augustine (In I. Joan, 10, 7)



Episodes from the life of Saint Francis de Sales, stained glass window by Claudius Lavergne (1880), Saint-Nizier church in Lyon