



## THE HEART OF AN APOSTLE

By Patrick Madrid

THE WIND HOWLED and the snow began to fall more heavily as nightfall gathered itself around the young priest. Though he had been riding since early afternoon, there were several miles yet to go before he would reach his destination. He kept to the path as best he could, but the drifting snow made it difficult for the horse to go much faster than a walk.

The temperature had dropped well below freezing, and after having ridden in the frigid open air for several hours, he was having trouble gripping the reins. He held them as best he could, hoping the thin wool gloves a Catholic couple had given him the previous winter would keep at bay the aching numbness in his hands long enough for him to revive them before the fire later that night. Shivering within his cloak, his teeth chattering, the priest continued reciting his evening prayers and plodded on into the night, his head bowed slightly against the wind.

His name was Francis de Sales, a Catholic priest not yet thirty years old who had volunteered for an arduous pastoral assignment in the Chablais region of southeastern France,<sup>1</sup> an area that had in recent decades become a mission field. He was on his way to a modest farmhouse in an outlying town a few miles away, the home of a Catholic family who had offered him hospitality whenever he was in the area. He knew he would be greeted with a hot meal and a fire in the hearth where he could warm himself and let his clothes dry out.

From that "safe house," he planned to spend the next week ministering to the few Catholics living in that town, preaching, celebrating Mass, hearing confessions, baptizing and, if the non-Catholics in the area would listen, giving public talks on the Catholic faith. Most of the inhabitants of the region were not

---

<sup>1</sup> The Chablais Region is the mountainous area south and west of Lake Geneva, straddling the modern-day border between France and Switzerland.

Catholic, so he knew he would face challenges and obstacles to his ministry.

This was nothing new to him. Riding alone through this cold night in January of 1596 was like many other such nights for the tired priest. He often traveled by night and in harsh weather to carry out his priestly ministry. Getting soaked and chilled, even chased, had become a way of life for him.

He smiled at the grim memory of another winter night he spent in the limbs of a tree, safely out of reach above the snapping jaws and threatening growls of a pack of dogs that had been set on him by a farmer who was displeased to see a Catholic priest venturing into the area. The dogs eventually wandered away in search of more accessible prey, but, fearful that they might return, Francis used his belt to lash himself to a sturdy branch so he could avoid the danger of falling out of the tree once he had fallen asleep. It was one of many such "adventures" he had endured cheerfully and out of love for Christ as he carried out his spiritual search and rescue mission.

### **A Man on a Mission**

Though Francis de Sales had been assigned by his bishop to a region that had been deeply Catholic for centuries, his presence there was not welcomed by most of the local inhabitants. Some sixty years earlier, the gloomy, powerful Protestant scholar, John Calvin, had taken up residence in Geneva, less than thirty miles from where the priest was riding. With the help of the armed might of the Protestant Duke of Savoy's troops, Calvin's iron grip rapidly closed itself around the population of the Chablais district, crushing the Catholic Church's influence there, and converting most of the local population to Protestantism. The area thus gradually became encased in a hardened, Calvinist anti-Catholicism.

In recent years, however, under the protection and patronage of Charles Emmanuel, the new Catholic Duke of Savoy, the Catholic Church had been allowed to reestablish itself. But uprooting the now-entrenched hatred of Catholicism was, as one can imagine, an extraordinarily difficult, if not seemingly impossible, task. And that was exactly why young Francis de Sales volunteered for it.

His work would involve not only the pastoral care of souls, but also a full-blown effort to re-evangelize the populace—and that, he knew, would be a formidable challenge. He faced vociferous opposition from the many Calvinist ministers in the region. They constantly thundered from their pulpits against the "evils" of Catholicism.

The priest's ministry in the towns and hamlets surrounding Geneva had been especially challenging. Few people would gather for, much less listen to, the open-air sermons he often preached in the town square. His Masses were poorly attended. It seemed that, aside from a few recent converts and those hardy Catholics who had managed to weather the decades-long Calvinist winter and remain true to the Church, no one was willing to listen to his arguments in favor of Catholicism. They had been too thoroughly indoctrinated against the Church.

Other priests had come and tried to gain a foothold for the Church there. Most had left soon afterward, deflated by their inability to get through to the people. But not this priest. Francis was persistent and patient. He felt a deep inner certitude that the mission of evangelization could be

accomplished, but it would require resourcefulness as well as tenacity. He knew that in due time, if he remained faithful to his apostolate, God would provide the graces necessary for the True Faith to flourish once again within the hearts of these good people.

### **With God There Are No “Impossible Dreams”**

Francis had been sent out in search of not just one lost sheep, but tens of thousands of them, the ones who had strayed or were led out of the fold and had been grazing on the arid prairies of Calvinist Protestantism. His mission was to lead them back to the green pastures of the fullness of Truth. To do that effectively, he had to remain faithful to his personal prayer life.

The life of a missionary, enduring bad weather, illness, hunger, rejection, persecution, and other hardships, will be filled with joy and grow fruitful only with a solid prayer life. This aspect of reaching out to others and inviting them home to the Church is often ignored. But as Francis knew, nothing meaningful can be accomplished in this arena without prayerful reliance on God and his grace. As Christ told us: “What is impossible for human beings is possible for God” (Luke 18:27).

The situation Francis de Sales faced when he arrived looked, by human standards, to be an impossible one. But he knew better.

### **Marks of a True Apostle**

Because he was faithful in his prayer life, a fountainhead of God’s grace welled up within him and flowed outward, reaching untold numbers of people. Conversions occurred, not as a result of clever preaching, but because he was a man of deep prayer and trust in the power and mercy of God. He was a true apostle of Christ who was not daunted by the seemingly impregnable resistance to the Church he saw in the people he had come to evangelize. He knew God’s grace could melt even the hardest hearts. What God needed was someone to take the message to the people (see Romans 10:14-18).

Above all, this priest was a model of charity and unassuming virtue. Even when he felt exasperated or angry with the negative reactions many people gave him, he was kind and helpful to all he encountered in spite of the indifference, anti-Catholic scorn, and even outright physical threats he sometimes encountered. As he would relate in later years, it was his reliance on God and commitment to daily prayer and the sacraments that enabled him to carry out this difficult apostolic work. His fidelity to the “little things” in his daily life, especially his consistency in prayer (even when — especially when — he didn’t feel like praying), was his loving response to Christ’s words: “The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones” (Luke 16:10).

In addition to having the heart of an apostle (literally, “one who is sent”), he also had the heart of a shepherd (one who cares for the flock). He had the tender heart of the Good Shepherd Himself (see John 10:1-16), and so he went in search of those sheep who had wandered away. He went in search of them with the love of Christ and, ultimately, that loving patience is what conquered error, dispelled confusion and mistrust, and brought reconciliation and peace to a troubled people. In response to God’s

age-old question “Whom will I send?” he answered, “Here I am. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8).

Francis didn’t go out of desire to win arguments, nor was he interested in accumulating converts as if they were trophies, monuments to his efforts at apologetics and evangelization. He certainly didn’t hate or disrespect the Protestants whom he had been sent to evangelize. Rather, he had a deep love for them as fellow Christians, and he recognized them for what they were: men and women who were loved by Christ with the same intensity and passion that Christ loves everyone — but men and women who had drifted away from the fullness of the True Faith.

These weren’t bad people, he reminded himself often. And in spite of the antipathy many of them felt for the Catholic Church, Francis de Sales saw them as his brothers and sisters. He loved them with the love of Christ — not in a superior or haughty way, but with the humble love of a man who goes in search of a lost brother. And, by the grace of God, that selfless love for others eventually yielded a vast crop of good fruit.

### **Try New Methods**

Francis realized that his preaching and good example, as important as they are in the life of any priest, weren’t sufficient to persuade the intransigent non-Catholics he had worked so hard to win over to the Church. Circumstances required ingenuity. So Francis developed a methodology for sharing the Faith in a way that proved extremely effective.

He knew that the good Protestant folk of the Chablais region had for decades been taught by government and religious authorities to reject and even fear the Catholic religion. So strong was the negative “peer pressure” exerted on those who were curious enough about the message of this new Catholic priest to make them want to attend his conferences that many stayed away simply because they didn’t want to be reproached by their neighbors. Recognizing this problem, Francis changed his strategy.

Each week, he composed a brief apologetics essay on some aspect of the issues that separated Catholics and Protestants: the Eucharist, the authority of the Church, the infallibility of the pope, Mary, the sacraments, and other subjects. He wrote simple but very convincing biblical explanations for these Catholic teachings, and he took great care to respond (always charitably) to the standard objections and challenges raised by the Protestant ministers who opposed him wherever he went. He had each essay printed up in bulk quantities and he personally distributed them.

Being an astute judge of human nature, Francis disseminated his writings in a way that was “as wise as a serpent and as gentle as a dove” (see Matt. 10:16). Early each morning before the townspeople had awakened, Francis made his way quietly down the streets, slipping his tracts under the door of each home, Catholic and Protestant. He knew that if the people could just read for themselves the biblical and historical case for the Catholic Church he presented in his writings — in the privacy of their own homes and free from the negative peer pressure of their neighbors — they would be much more likely to consider the Catholic message. And that’s precisely what happened.

For four years, Francis de Sales offered this remarkable combination of personal sanctity, preaching, apologetics essays, and outreach to those around him with his unselfish charity and genuine Christ-like

love for them. At last, God began to work a miracle of grace. Conversions appeared. At first they were scattered and intermittent, but within months the trickle had turned into a steady stream.

Within a few years more, the stream had reached flood tide proportions. Not surprisingly, Francis was made bishop of Geneva to guide this rapidly growing flock. By the time he died in 1622, nearly sixty thousand former Protestants in and around Geneva (Calvin’s stronghold) had converted to the Catholic Church and re-embraced the Faith of their fathers. Indeed, many prominent Calvinist theologians and ministers were among those who converted to the Catholic faith as a result of the gentle apostolic zeal of this holy priest.

It’s not hard to guess how this happy story ends. After his death, Francis de Sales was widely regarded as a saint. That belief was confirmed when the Church canonized him in 1665.

### **What Can We Learn From St. Francis de Sales?**

You may be thinking to yourself, “Yes, Francis de Sales was an impressive man. But I’m not like him. He had an obvious gift for explaining the Catholic faith and bringing people into the Church. I don’t. He was a priest, he was trained for that sort of thing, and he lived hundreds of years ago when things weren’t nearly so complicated as they are now. And besides, he was a saint — and I’m definitely not.”

That reaction is understandable, but it’s incorrect. True, the courageous example of St. Francis de Sales can seem so beyond our own abilities and circumstances that we are tempted to dismiss it as unattainable. But to do that would be a big mistake.

Even though you will probably never be called by God to brave physical hardship or danger in sharing the Faith with others, the Lord is calling you to live as an apostle, to be ready, willing, and able to help Him help those around you. Christ wants all people to come to Him and His Church (see 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). He works through us to make that happen: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ . . . and entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us” (2 Cor. 5:18-20).<sup>2</sup>

God wants to work through *you*, regardless of your circumstances — in your office, your home, your social circles, your parish — to search for and rescue those who have drifted or are starting to drift away from the Faith. You can reach people in your own daily life who have been put there by God’s mysterious providence. Though your own personal temperament, abilities, and circumstances are unique and differ from those of others, God wants to make you His coworker in the vast drama of salvation. He has a vital role for you.

The great things God did through the apostolate of St. Francis de Sales are not out of your own reach.

---

<sup>2</sup> While this passage is speaking primarily about St. Paul’s and the other Apostles’ priestly ministry of reconciliation, it can also be understood in a broader sense to refer to the role and mission all baptized Catholics have as “ambassadors for Christ.”

Whether you’re a housewife, a dentist, a student, retired, a factory worker, a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker, you can effectively bring people into (or back into) a close relationship with Christ and His Church.<sup>3</sup>

As the old saying goes, we Catholics today are “sitting on the shoulders of giants” — that is, we have the advantage of two thousand years’ worth of good examples to follow, plus effective techniques in evangelization that have been developed by the saints down through the centuries. From that vantage point, drawing on the wisdom accumulated during the Church’s long missionary journey, we can learn the secrets of the great saints and how they were able successfully to search for and rescue the lost sheep they encountered. You must learn to apply that wisdom in your own life. Just call out to Him: “Here I am, Lord. Send me!”

### **Ask for God’s Help**

And here is the first of the secrets the saints can teach us: If you ask God for His help as you seek to bring your friends and family members, coworkers and even total strangers, closer to Christ and His Church, He will give it to you. He promised, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7; see also verses 8-11).<sup>4</sup>

Do you know someone who is far from Christ? Away from the sacraments? Estranged from the Church? Ask Christ for the graces you need to be an apostle to that person — He will give them to you. Seek out those who are wandering far from the Lord — you will find them. Knock gently at the door of that person’s heart — it will be opened to you so that God’s grace can pour in and transform him.

All success, of course, comes from God’s grace. As the Lord said, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). But He also stands ready to provide you with all the graces necessary to be a true apostle, regardless of your state in life, so that — with the help of the Holy Spirit — you can go out in search of those who have wandered away from the Catholic faith and have success in bringing them home again. You will be able to say with confidence and joyful humility, “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

That’s precisely the attitude St. Francis de Sales had. He knew he could never make any headway among the Calvinists (a deeply religious, Bible-believing people), unless he relied on Christ for his strength and guidance. Despite his brilliant intellect, his gift for writing, and his many other talents, St. Francis de Sales’ success as a “search and rescue” evangelist was, ultimately, not a result of those things.

Let me repeat that point for maximum impact: His being a clever, well-spoken, master theologian was not

---

<sup>3</sup> The principles outlined in my book, *Search and Rescue: How to Bring Your Family and Friends Into (or Back Into) the Catholic Church* (available from [www.patrickmadrid.com](http://www.patrickmadrid.com)) will show you exactly how to do it.

<sup>4</sup> This passage reminds us of how God wants to give us all good things, and He also wants us to come to Him, as Children approach their loving Father, to ask for them. God is delighted when we intercede for others, petitioning Him on their behalf (cf., 1 Timothy 2:1-3).

responsible for his success in making converts. Someone with few intellectual gifts and minimal social grace could also have accomplished such a mission of converting souls to Christ, and in the course of the history of the Catholic Church, many such people have done so.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Key to Making Converts**

So, what was it about St. Francis de Sales (and all the other effective apologists and evangelists) that provided the key to their ability to make converts? That key to success is within your own reach. It lies in the quiet recesses of your own heart. It’s the grace and virtue of supernatural charity — love.

Above all else, Francis de Sales had the heart of an apostle. True, he was intellectually gifted, he had an amiable and mild disposition that helped him make friends easily, and he was an effective writer and public speaker. But none of those advantages would have amounted to anything substantial in his mission had he not possessed a burning love for Christ and for his neighbor, a love that radiated and warmed those around him. This wellspring of charity (purely a gift of God’s grace) animated all his actions and made effective his efforts to spread the kingdom of Christ.

You might think that making converts is reserved for only the great saints, but you would be wrong. You might imagine that the powerful graces of conversion that God showered on people through the efforts and prayers of St. Francis de Sales are unattainable for someone like yourself. But if you think that, you’re mistaken.

God can accomplish great good through you. All He needs is for you to say “yes” to His invitation.

*Copyright 1998, Patrick Madrid, all rights reserved.*

---

<sup>5</sup> A perfect example of this was St. John Vianney, the simple country priest who is renowned the world over as the Curé of Ars. Intellectually and socially, he was considered by some to be a “dunce.” He nearly flunked out of the seminary and was only barely ordained to the priesthood because of the pity a kindly bishop had on him. Yet he was a man who burned with love for God and for others. And in spite of his meager intellectual abilities, this grace of charity gave him an amazing ability to reach even hardened sinners with the love of God. He made thousands of converts and “reverts” to the Catholic Church.