Of all the themes to emerge from the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the concept of the universal call to holiness is perhaps one of the most noteworthy. In *Lumen Gentium*, the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (November 21, 1964), for example, the Council Fathers taught that “all are called to sanctity”¹ and that “all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love. . . .”² While they recognized that the “forms and tasks of life are many,” the Council Fathers insisted that “holiness is one . . .”³ Therefore, “Each one . . . according to his own gifts and duties must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith, which arouses hope and works through love.”⁴

Similarly, a year after Lumen Gentium, the Council promulgated *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the "Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People" (November 18, 1965). Here, too, the Council Fathers insisted that the laity, as members of the Mystical Body of Christ, "do not separate their union with Christ from their ordinary life; but through the very performance of their tasks, which are God’s will for them, actually promote the growth of their union with him."⁵

Writing over twenty years later, Pope John Paul II, in his *Christifideles Laici*, "The Lay Members of Christ’s Faithful People," reiterated these themes, saying that the fundamental vocation of the lay faithful is "the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity. Holiness is the greatest testimony of the dignity conferred on a disciple of Christ."⁶ It is the "basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church"⁷ by the Council. It is a charge which is an "undeniable requirement arising from the mystery of the Church"⁸ because the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ "whose members share in the same life of holiness of the Head who is Christ . . . ."⁹

Thus the idea of a universal call to holiness has captured the imagination of modern day Catholics, many of whom speak about it as if it were something new in the Church. A little
investigation, however, reveals that there is, in fact, nothing really new about the universal call to holiness, although the emphasis it has received in recent years may make it seem to be so.

Although the concept of holiness for all can be traced as far back as the Old Testament, in the history of spirituality it found a particularly effective proponent in the person of St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622). This saintly Bishop of Geneva combined his apostolic zeal for souls with his extraordinary writing ability to give not only his contemporaries, but also Christians today, a gold mine of spiritual advice which is still pertinent some four hundred years after it was written.10 This article will try to show, through an examination of his Introduction to the Devout Life, as well as excerpts from some of his letters of spiritual direction, that St. Francis de Sales truly believed in the universal call to holiness and that he taught that an essential element in the response to that call is the fulfillment of the duties of one’s state in life.

Scriptural Basis

The concept of holiness for all has a solid basis in Sacred Scripture. In the Old Testament, for example, God said to Moses, "Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lv. 19:2). In the New Testament Our Lord Himself tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, "In a word, you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48). Furthermore, St. Paul insists, "It is God’s will that you grow in holiness . . ." (1 Thes. 4:3) and "[God] wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4).

Historical Background

In the history of spirituality, the concept of holiness for all "had been taught previously by such theologians and spiritual writers as St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus, and Louis of Granada."11 From the early part of the fifteenth century Gerson in France had "inclined toward spirituality in the sense of a 'universal devotion.' His celebrated cry, 'Monachatus non est pietas' ('Devotion is not the prerogative of the monk’) became proverbial."12 In early seventeenth century France, however, this concept of the Biblical call to holiness for all "had in practice become considerably narrowed in scope."13

At this time there were at least four currents of thought as to who could attain perfection and how to go about it. First, as in the Middle Ages, there were those who believed that one attained holiness by withdrawing from the world and entering a cloister. Secondly, some maintained that the "easy devotion" of the humanist Pierre Charron was all that was required. A third group, inspired by the Rhenish-Flemish mystics, asserted that the devout life was reserved for a contemplative elite. A fourth school of thought, and the one to which St. Francis de Sales adhered, was influenced by Spanish and Italian thinkers. This group believed in the universal call to holiness, and was inspired to a great degree by Louis of Granada (1504-1588).14

Louis of Granada, the "outstanding spiritual writer among the Spanish Dominicans of the sixteenth century,"15 taught that "all Christians are called to perfection" and that each Christian "should seek the goal of perfection in accordance with his temperament, his state in life, and the gifts he has received from God."16
It is clear that St. Francis de Sales would have been familiar with all these varieties of thought at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century for, "he had read widely and deeply the works of all the schools of spirituality. Perhaps no one else of his time was as well informed as he."17 Schooled by Jesuits since the age of fifteen, he had also taken part in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, "during which he had heard `the universal call’ that Jesus Christ launched in the gospel to all men . . ."18

**Origin of the Introduction to the Devout Life**

On December 8, 1602, Francis de Sales was consecrated Bishop of Geneva, having been coadjutor bishop for three years until the death of his predecessor, Bishop Claude de Granier, in September, 1602.19 Francis took up the busy life of a bishop with all the obligations it entailed. Over the years, his contacts with people in the confessional and with others seeking his advice had "quickened his desire to furnish souls—desirous of attaining evangelical perfection—with a ‘guide’ for the spiritual life."20

As a practical matter, however, he simply did not have enough time to write to or meet with all the people who were asking him for spiritual direction. Although he had already begun working on what would later be known as the Treatise on the Love of God, the idea came to him, as early as 1602, of writing a more basic guidebook which would "explain the essence of his direction"21 and which would leave his readers free to adapt his ideas "to their personal cases."22 Some years later, a young woman, Mme. de Charmoisy, came to Francis for spiritual direction, but in 1608 she was called away from Annecy to Chambéry to take care of some legal matters. Out of concern for her spiritual well being, Francis compiled a set of spiritual exercises for her and put her under the care of his friend, Jesuit Father Jean Fourier. When Father Fourier read the exercises Francis had written out for Mme. de Charmoisy, he immediately wrote to Francis, urging him to publish them in a book. Francis obeyed, and by December of 1608, The Introduction to the Devout Life was printed and available for sale.23 The book became an immediate "bestseller" and went through several revisions until it was finally edited and corrected by Francis himself in 1619.24

The success of the Introduction was such that some have concluded that this was the first book of its type to be written for the laity. However, as alluded to earlier, and as Elisabeth Stopp points out,

the strengthening of individual and personal piety was . . . fundamental to the thought of the Counter Reformation in general. The movement of bringing committed prayerfulness out of the cloister into the world had been going on fairly intensively for most of the sixteenth century . . . . [There were] countless primers, books of devotion and meditation, ways of perfection and spiritual emblem books which would never have achieved their great diffusion if they had been designed only for `religious.'25

In fact, a bibliography of books published between 1600 and 1608 contains thirteen pages of titles having to do with spirituality for lay people.26 Therefore, Stopp maintains, in the case of St. Francis de Sales,
It was not so much what he said that struck a new chord but the personal, intimate way in which
he said it, taking the reader to his heart from the first, speaking to him as to a well-known friend
and quite simply assuming that the love of God was the only thing that mattered.27

Content of the Introduction to the Devout Life

The Introduction is written for the beginner in the spiritual life who is addressed as "Philothea,"
meaning, "a soul loving, or in love with, God."28 The book is divided into five parts. Part I has
to do with how the soul begins to undertake the devout life. Part II deals with prayer and the
sacraments. Part III discusses the practice of virtue. Part IV gives instructions on overcoming
temptations. Finally, Part V teaches how to renew the soul and confirm it in its desire to lead a
devout life.

It is clear from the beginning that the book was written for the laity. In the Preface Francis
plainly states:

My purpose is to instruct those who live in town, within families, or at court, and by their state of
life are obliged to live an ordinary life as to outward appearances. Frequently, on the pretext of
some supposed impossibility, they will not even think of undertaking a devout life.29

In August of 1609, a few months after the first edition of the Introduction was published, Francis
reiterated this point in a letter to one of his friends in which he stated that he had written this
book "always having in mind the people who live amid the pressures of the world."30

Part of the genius of St. Francis de Sales was that he not only asserted that devotion was possible
in every way of life, but that he insisted that devotion could be carried out in different ways,
depending upon one's vocation in life:

Devotion must be exercised in different ways by the gentleman, the worker, the servant, the
prince, the widow, the young girl, and the married woman. Not only is this true, but the practice
of devotion must also be adapted to the strength, activities, and duties of each particular person. .

It is an error, or rather a heresy, to wish to banish the devout life from the regiment of soldiers,
the mechanic's shop, the court of princes, or the home of married people. It is true, Philothea,
that purely contemplative, monastic, and religious devotion cannot be exercised in such states of
life. However, besides those three kinds of devotion there are several others adapted to bring
perfection to those living in the secular state

. . . .Wherever we may be, we can and should aspire to a perfect life.31

Prayer is fundamental to the spiritual life, of course, and so Francis insisted that time be set aside
daily for mental prayer. However, it is interesting to note that he also insisted that people be able
to pass easily from periods of prayer to periods of work demanded by their vocation:
I mean that the lawyer must be able to pass from prayer to pleading cases, the merchant to commerce, and the married woman to her duties as wife and her household tasks with so much ease and tranquillity that their minds are not disturbed. Since both prayer and your other duties are in conformity with God’s will, you must pass from one to the other with a devout and humble mind.32

Francis also showed people how they can "pray always" (Lk. 18:1), and emphasized the importance of short, ejaculatory prayers:

There is no difficulty in this exercise, as it may be interspersed among all our tasks and duties without any inconvenience, since in this spiritual retirement or amid these interior aspirations we only relax quickly and briefly.33

Other practical aspects of the spiritual life of the laity, such as the extent of their fasting and the way they dress must also be adapted to their state in life, according to St. Francis de Sales. It is clear that he favors moderation in fasting when he writes:

The more some men mistreat the body in the beginning, the more they are led to pamper it in the end. Wouldn’t they have done better to have a program that is balanced and in keeping with the duties and tasks their state in life obliges them to?34

As to the proper way for the devout lay person to dress, Francis asserts:

For my part, I would have devout people, whether men or women, always the best dressed in a group but the least pompous and affected. . . . I would have them adorned with grace, decency, and dignity.35

The Little Virtues

Perhaps nowhere does St. Francis de Sales better illustrate how a lay person grows in holiness than he does when he teaches about virtue. His down-to-earth approach to spiritual direction led him to emphasize what he called the "little virtues." He began by showing that the kind of virtues a person must practice varies according to that person’s vocation:

Every state of life must practice some particular virtue. A bishop’s virtues are of one kind, a prince’s of another, a soldier’s of a third kind, and those of a married woman are different from a widow’s. All men should possess all the virtues, yet all are not bound to exercise them in equal measure. Each person must practice in a special manner the virtues needed by the kind of life he is called to.36

St. Francis de Sales realized that beginners in the spiritual life sometimes go to extremes when they first undertake the practice of virtue. They may mistakenly think that experience of raptures, ecstasies, and other unusual mystical phenomena are desirable. Instead, Francis cautioned, let us try to love and serve God well, to be "good men and women, devout men and women, pious men and pious women."37 He says that Our Lord would prefer that we cultivate the practice of such "little virtues" as "patience, meekness, self-mortification, humility, obedience, poverty, chastity,
tenderness toward our neighbors, bearing with their imperfections, diligence, and holy fervor."38 Near the end of the Introduction, he exhorts Philothea, "Don’t be ashamed to practice the ordinary, necessary actions that bring us to the love of God."39

St. Francis de Sales tried to convey to people that there should be no dichotomy between "the devout life" and the way a person lives his everyday life in the world. In the very beginning of the Introduction, he says this:

Genuine, living devotion, Philothea, presupposes love of God, and hence it is simply true love of God. Yet it is not always love as such. Inasmuch as divine life adorns the soul, it is called grace, which makes us pleasing to his Divine Majesty. Inasmuch as it strengthens us to do good, it is called charity. When it has reached a degree of perfection at which it not only makes us do good but also do this carefully, frequently, and promptly, it is called devotion. . . . In short, devotion is simply that spiritual agility and vivacity by which charity works in us or by aid of which we work quickly and lovingly.40

With this explanation St. Francis de Sales goes right to the heart of what the Christian life is all about, for what he is describing is love of God and love of neighbor. Nothing could be more basic. The mandate was given in the Old Testament: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! There fore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Dt. 6:4-5). "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord" (Lv. 19:18). Christ reiterated the essential character of these two great commandments in the New Testament, telling the lawyer who asked Him which commandment of the law was the greatest, "On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well" (Mt. 22:40).

This type of devotion, or charity, harms no one, but makes all things more perfect. It must always be carried out in keeping with one’s vocation:

It not only does no injury to one’s vocation or occupation, but on the contrary adorns and beautifies it. . . . every vocation becomes more agreeable when united with devotion. Care of one’s family is rendered more peaceable, love of husband and wife more sincere, service of one’s prince more faithful, and every type of employment more pleasant and agreeable.41

**Loving One’s Vocation**

St. Francis de Sales taught that not only should a person practice the virtues suitable to his vocation, but he should also love his vocation in itself, precisely because that vocation comes to him from God. He once advised a woman who was seeking peace of soul to ask God often during the day "to give you love of your vocation, and to say like St. Paul when he was converted, 'Lord, what will You have me to do?'" (Acts 9:6)42

It is useless, Francis believed, to waste time longing for another way of life. Thus he again quoted St. Paul to this same woman, saying, "'Let each one stay in his vocation before God.'" (1 Cor. 7:24)43 He expressed the same idea with his characteristic wit in a letter to another woman in 1607, some time before the Introduction was first published: "What is the use of building
castles in Spain when we have to live in France? This is my old lesson . . . "44 He likewise advised a priest to "consider as temptation everything that will be suggested to you regarding changing your place . . . ."45

Francis did not deny that every vocation, including his own, has its "irksome aspects,"46 which tend to make people think others are better off than they are. Yet he insisted that one must live joyously in whatever situation one finds oneself:

If I were not a bishop, knowing what I know, I should not wish to be one; but being one, not only am I obliged to do what this trying vocation requires, but I must do it joyously, and must take pleasure in it and be contented.47

To a woman who thought marriage hindered holiness, Francis wrote what has become one of his most famous lines, "Let us be what we are and let us be it well, to do honor to the Master whose work we are."48 What Francis called "the grand truth" is to "look at what God wants"49 so as to do His will and to try to please Him, since all that we are and all that we possess comes from Him who created us.

Finally, in a letter he wrote in 1608, St. Francis de Sales beautifully expressed the importance of serving God as we are:

. . . try to convince yourself . . . that God wants you to serve Him just as you are, both by practices that are suited to your state in life, and by the actions that go with it. Once you are convinced of this, you must bring yourself to a tender affection for your state in life and for everything about it, out of love for Him who wills it so.50

Conclusion

This article began with the assertion that although the concept of the universal call to holiness was one of the predominant themes of the Second Vatican Council, the idea itself is really nothing new in the Church. Its roots can be found in Scripture and in Tradition. The belief in Our Lord’s call to holiness for all found beautiful expression in seventeenth century France in the writings of St. Francis de Sales, particularly in his Introduction to the Devout Life and in his numerous letters of spiritual direction. It is clear that St. Francis de Sales believed that a person’s God-given vocation is not an obstacle to holiness. Rather, the fulfillment of the duties of one’s state in life is an indispensable element of an authentic Christian life. The spirituality of St. Francis de Sales has much to offer the Catholic lay person who strives to answer the call to holiness proclaimed by Vatican II.

End Notes

2. Ibid., Par. 40.

3. Ibid., Par. 41.

4. Ibid., Par. 41.


7. Ibid., Par. 16.

8. Ibid., Par. 16.

9. Ibid., Par. 16.

10. When Pope Pius XI declared St. Francis de Sales the Patron of Writers, he (the Pope) wrote that if the Introduction to the Devout Life were read by almost everyone, "Christian piety certainly would flourish the world over and the Church of God could rejoice in the assurance of a widespread attainment of holiness by her children." (cf. Rerum Omnium Perturbationem, Encyclical on St. Francis de Sales, January 26, 1923," in The Papal Encyclicals, 1903-1939, Claudia Carlen, I.H.M., ed. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Pierian Press, 1990), Par. 16.


16. Ibid., 201.

19. Ibid., 113.
20. Ibid., 166.
21. Ibid., 166.
22. Ibid., 166.
23. Ibid., 168.
24. Ibid., 169.
26. Ibid., 84.
27. Ibid., 76.
29. Ibid., 33.
30. Ravier, 178.
32. Ibid., II, 8.
33. Ibid., II, 13.
34. Ibid., III, 23.
35. Ibid., III, 25.
36. Ibid., III, 1.
37. Ibid., III, 2.
38. Ibid., III, 2.
39. Ibid., V, 18.
40. Ibid., I, 1.

41. Ibid., I, 3.


43. Ibid., 10.


45. Thy Will Be Done, 16.

46. Ibid., 9.

47. Ibid., 10.

48. Ibid., 20.

49. Ibid., 188.

50. Letters of Spiritual Direction, 113.
This passage from St. Francis de Sales was a major inspiration to fathers of the Second Vatican Council and stands behind one of the central passages of Vatican II, Chapter Five of Lumen Gentiun on the Universal Call to Holiness. Banner/featured image by Todd Frantom. Public domain. Originally posted on Jan 23 2020. St. Francis de Sales. St. Francis de Sales was born near Annecy, in Savoy, in 1567, shortly after the conclusion of the Council of Trent. He studied the law, but abandoning the prospect of a brilliant career in that field, was ordained to the priesthood in 1593, despite the opposition of his father. His first mission was to re-evangelize the people of his home district (the Chablais), who had gone over to Calvinism. A way to respond to the universal call for holiness in the midst of the world. Come to a virtual open house. To learn about Salesian spirituality and the St. Francis de Sales Association, you are most cordially invited to join us in a virtual open house with Zoom video conferencing across any device. All meetings are held Sundays, from 8 - 9 p.m. ET. Please click here to email us to request meeting details. 2021 Open House Dates: January 24, March 21, May 23, July 25, September 26, November 21. A Gentle Spirituality For Our Busy, Daily Lives. St. Francis de Sales (1567 - 1622) wrote two spiritual classics that remain fresh and timely to this day, The Introduction to the Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God. The universal call to holiness is a teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that all people are called to be holy, and is based on Matthew 5:48: “Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). In the opening pages of the Bible, the call to holiness is expressed in the Lord's words to Abraham: “Walk before me, and be blameless” (Genesis 17:1).[1]. An example of this teaching can be found in the Introduction to the Devout Life of Francis de Sales. Written in the 17th century, it describes a method to approach holiness in everyday life.[2], and the Universal Call to Holiness. Author: Rev. James Socias. Midwest theological forum. Downers Grove, Illinois. VOCATIONS and the Universal Call to Holiness. Table of contents. ix Abbreviations used for the Books of the Bible. ix General Abbreviations. x Foreword. 251 Art and Photo Credits. 255 Index. 1 Introduction: God Is Calling You 2 Plan and Purpose 2 How We Are Different 4 God Desires Our Happiness 5 Sidebar: Blaise Paschal: The Search for Happiness 6 God Loves Us and Draws Near to Us 6 Discovering God Through the Gift of Faith 7 Sidebar: Zacchaeus: You Cannot Enjoy Perfect Delight, E... St. Francis de Sales was born on August 21, 1567, in France, near the present-day Swiss border. He was the firstborn of thirteen children, five of whom died in infancy, and was named after Francis of Assisi.Â It was there that Francis learned the wisdom that enabled him to live a life of holiness in the midst of the world, wisdom which he later developed in detail in his famous work, Introduction to the Devout Life. His other major work is the Treatise on the Love of God, which presents a detailed account of the more advanced stages of the spiritual journey.Â He always encouraged his priests to look for lay people called to â€œdevotionâ€ and work with them, giving them formation.Â He was canonized a saint in 1665, and declared a Doctor of the Universal Church in 1877.