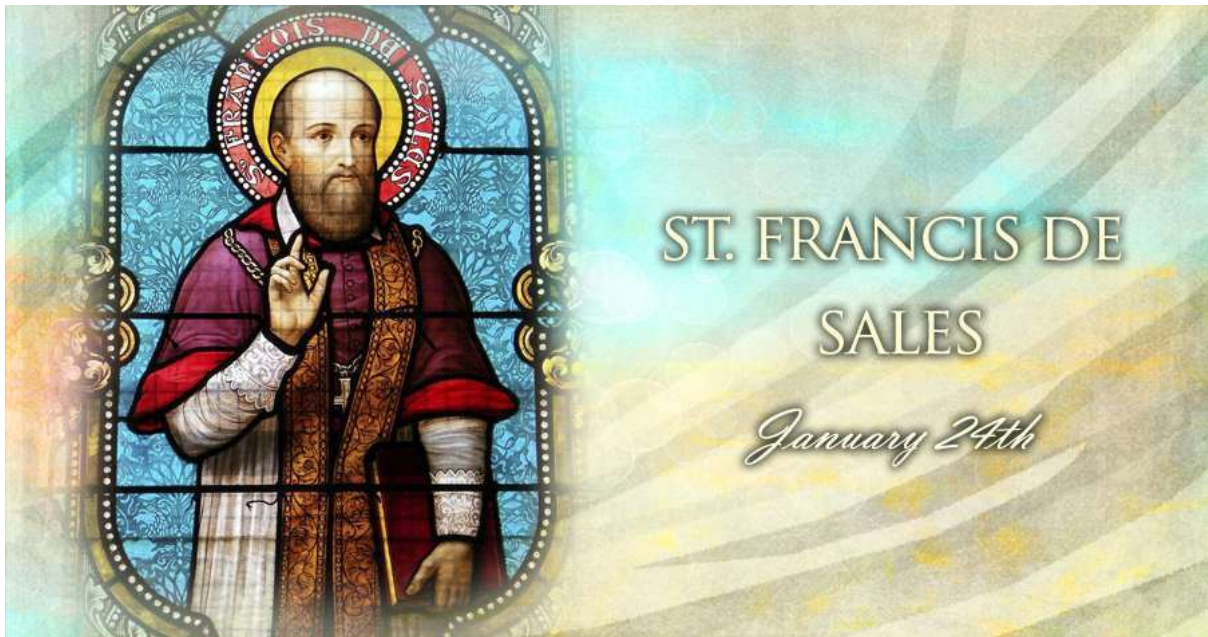


St. Francis de Sales



Jan. 24 marks the Feast of St. Francis de Sales, the patron saint of writers and Christian unity whose role as a priest and bishop helped bring thousands of Protestants back to the Catholic Church. In the late 16th and early 17th century, St. Francis de Sales conducted spiritual direction both in person and in written correspondence. This inspired his famous work "Introduction to the Devout Life."

During his ministry in Switzerland, he wrote and distributed religious tracts that made inroads among Protestants and helped between 40,000 and 70,000 return to the Catholic faith. Because he is a patron saint of writers, his feast day traditionally marks the release of the Pope's annual message for World Communications Day. Pope Benedict XVI's 2013 message reflected on social networks and their potential to strengthen unity and harmony between people. He also warned that these enable a mindset that rewards popularity, rather than rewarding what has intrinsic value.

St. Francis de Sales was no stranger to unpopularity. As a priest he volunteered to lead a mission to return the Calvinist Switzerland back to the Catholic faith. He faced much hostility, including death threats and would-be assassins. He was born in 1567 in the Savoy region in what is now part of France. He was a diplomat's son, born into a household with great devotion to St. Francis of Assisi.

He studied rhetoric, the humanities and law in preparation for a political career. He had resolved to hold to religious celibacy and he held a deep devotion to the Virgin Mary, but he kept this strong spiritual life secret from the world. This devotion clashed with the wishes of his father, who had arranged a marriage for him. The Catholic bishop of Geneva found Francis de Sales a position in the Swiss Church, leading to his ordination as a priest in 1593.

He was named Bishop of Geneva in 1602, after which he worked to restore Geneva's churches and religious orders. He helped the future saint Jean Frances de Chantal, whom he had served

as spiritual director, found a women's religious order. He died in 1622 in Lyons at a convent he had helped to found. Frances de Sales was canonized in 1665 and named a Doctor of the Church in 1877.