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A stained glass window of a white, male, bearded saint

A likeness of St. Francis de Sales is seen in stained glass at Caldwell Chapel on the campus of The Catholic University of America in Washington May 25, 2021. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)

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The most important question a Christian can ask when making any decision in life is "where the greatest love is to be found," Pope Francis wrote in a letter marking the 400th anniversary of St. Francis de Sales, a doctor of the church.

Thinking about the legacy of St. Francis, who was born in France in 1567 and died in 1622, Francis said he was convinced that the French saint's "flexibility and his farsighted vision have much to say to us," especially in recognizing the real-life struggles of ordinary people and judging faith by love.

The pope's letter was titled "Totum Amoris Est" ("Everything Pertains to Love") and was released by the Vatican Dec. 28, the 400th anniversary of the death of St. Francis de Sales, who was bishop of Geneva, Switzerland, co-founder of the

Visitation Sisters and a prolific writer, including of tracts he would slip under the doors of people's homes.

In a letter that quoted heavily from St. Francis' books, "Treatise on the Love of God" and "Introduction to the Devout Life," but also from his own exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel," Francis said the saint has much to teach the church today.

"We are challenged to be a church that is outward-looking and free of all worldliness, even as we live in this world, share people's lives and journey with them in attentive listening and acceptance," the pope wrote. "That is what Francis de Sales did when he discerned the events of his times with the help of God's grace."

"Today he bids us set aside undue concern for ourselves, for our structures and for what society thinks about us, and consider instead the real spiritual needs and expectations of our people," the pope said.

Returning in 1602 to Paris, where he previously studied, St. Francis de Sales saw a world changing around him, the pope said, and he knew that he must respond theologically and pastorally.

"This was certainly not the first time that he had encountered individual fervent Christians, but now things were different," the pope said. "Paris was no longer the city devastated by the wars of religion that he had known in the years of his education, or by the bitter conflicts that he had seen in the Chablais," a region on the border of France and Switzerland.

"He encountered something unexpected: a flood 'of saints, true saints, in great numbers and in all places,'" as St. Francis described them. "There were men and women of culture, professors of the Sorbonne, civil authorities, princes and princesses, servants and maids, men and women religious. A whole world athirst for God in a variety of ways."

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The saintly bishop developed a new approach to spiritual direction, the pope said. "It was a method that renounced all harshness and respected completely the dignity and gifts of a devout soul, whatever its frailties."

Like the Second Vatican Council would teach 350 years later, the pope wrote, St. Francis de Sales knew that every person was called to holiness and that the call was specific to each person and his or her talents, shortcomings and state in life.

And, he said, the saint knew that the call was a grace, poured out with love.

"At the same time, this grace never makes us passive. It leads us to realize that God's love radically precedes us, and that his first gift consists precisely in our acceptance of that love," the pope wrote. "Each person therefore is responsible for cooperating with his or her own fulfillment, with spreading his or her wings with confident trust before the gust of God's wind."

"More important than any kind of useless rigidity or self-absorption," Francis wrote, St. Francis de Sales encouraged the faithful "to keep asking at every moment, in every decision, in every situation in life, where the greatest love is to be found."

St. John Paul II, he noted, referred to St. Francis de Sales as the "Doctor of Divine Love," not primarily because he wrote about divine love, but because "he was an outstanding witness to that love."

"His writings were no theory concocted behind a desk, far from the concerns of ordinary people," Francis said. "His teachings were the fruit of a great sensitivity to experience."

"To live in the midst of the secular city while nurturing the interior life, to combine the desire for perfection with every state of life, and to discover an interior peace that does not separate us from the world but teaches us how to live in it and to appreciate it, but also to maintain a proper detachment from it -- that was the aim of Francis de Sales, and it remains a valuable lesson for men and women in our own time," the pope wrote.