

For four-and-a-half centuries Francis de Sales has been in and out of style, at one moment riding the wave of popularity, at another left behind. Yet every generation that has read his books and letters has found in them a wise and warm, moderate and gentle companion for their spiritual journey. He comes across as psychologically insightful, as someone whose advice you can trust.

He was a nobleman, a scholar, a lawyer, a bishop, a religious founder, and, in time, a saint and a doctor of the Church. But nowhere in his writing does one get the feeling prevalent in so much classical spiritual literature that the author was reluctantly human. He was, as he told St. Jane de Chantal, “as human as anyone could possibly be.”

But there was something else about his writing that was unique for his time and important to this day. Unlike so many others, he did not write for priests and nuns, for the walled spirituality of the cloister. He wrote for people with families to feed, clothe, and educate. While this is not uncommon today, what remains unusual is his ability to make the loftiest goals of mystical tradition accessible to men and women busy in the everyday workplace without compromising their demands.

Let Francis speak for himself:

In the creation God commanded the plants of the earth to bring forth fruit, each after its kind; and in a similar way he commands Christians, who are the living plants of his church, to bring forth the fruits of devotion, each according to his calling and vocation. There is a different practice of devotion for the gentleman and the mechanic, for the prince and the servant, for the wife, the maiden and the widow. The practice of devotion must be adapted to the capabilities, the engagements, and the duties of each individual.

It would not do if the bishop were to adopt a Carthusian solitude; if the father of a family refused, like the Capuchins, to save money; if the artisan spent his whole time in church like a professed religious; or if the religious were to expose himself to all manners of society on his neighbor's behalf as the bishop must do. Such devotion would be inconsistent and ridiculous. Yet this kind of mistake is not infrequently made, and the world, being either not able or not willing to distinguish between true devotion and the indiscretion of the false devotee, condemns that devotion which nevertheless has no share in these inconsistencies.

True devotion hinders no one, rather, it perfects everything. Whenever it is out of keeping with any person's legitimate vocation, it must be spurious.

It is not merely an error but a heresy to suppose that a devout life is necessarily banished from the soldier's

camp, the merchant's shop, the prince's court, or the domesticate's hearth.

In 1608, when first published, these words must have been somewhat shocking to a generation raised on the notion that high sanctity was very much the preserve of monks and nuns. Nearly four centuries later, it may not be shocking, but it is nevertheless reassuring to those with bills to pay *and* prayers to say.

It is also challenging.