

Hope Springs Eternal:

A Salesian Life Lesson for the Jubilee Year

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On Christmas Eve 2024, with a dramatic three knocks on the Holy Door, Pope Francis opened a Jubilee Year in the Church.¹ It continues to be celebrated throughout 2025 and will formally close on the Feast of the Epiphany in 2026.

For this special occasion – which ordinarily happens every twenty-five years – the pope chose as a thematic message the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans: “Hope does not disappoint.”²

Before considering the truth of that claim, we should first distinguish what “hope” means.

To many people, “hope” is just a wish or desire. It entails looking forward to something we would really like to happen, or come true, if only it could. But hope as a wish can, in fact, turn out to be disappointing.

Others speak of “hope” as a disposition or an outlook. It arises as an optimism that expects things to turn out well, even if we do not or cannot know for sure that they will. Depending on the outcome, this expectation can also be disappointed.

But for the purpose of this paper, we take up the pope’s sense of what hope means. He calls it a virtue, one that gives inward direction and purpose to life. That is the kind of hope that does not disappoint. And that is something everyone could use!

The big question is: how do we get it or keep it, especially in light of so many real-life experiences that run contrary to it?

To answer that question, we turn to the wisdom of ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622), Bishop and Doctor of the Church. First, we will examine an experience of hope in his life, one that

¹ For more details, visit the official Jubilee website at www.vatican.va/content/iubilaeum2025/en.html.

² Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, Bull of Indication of the Ordinary Jubilee Year of 2025 (9 May 2024) at www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo-2025.html.

stands as the defining moment for all that he will later say and do. Then, we will explore his teaching on hope, which shows his spiritual genius and gives us an enduring lesson for the Church.

A biographical story

In 1567, Francis de Sales was born into a noble family in the duchy of Savoy (which used to exist in the region of today’s northwestern Italy / southeastern France). His very young mother concerned herself with the child’s upbringing in the faith. But his prominent father planned for his first-born son a splendid career in government. For that, Francis would need a top-tier education.

So, as a young lad, just twelve years old,³ he was sent off to Paris, accompanied only by his cousins and their tutor. When they finally arrived – in those days it took a few weeks’ travel by horseback – Francis took his place at the Clermont College, a Jesuit-run school where he would find the support of faith while he studied the liberal arts and philosophy at the renowned University.

Keep in mind that this is Paris, not a countryside village; and Francis is barely a teenager, not yet a saint! The boy is about to learn first-hand the ways of high society, which was everything one can imagine and worse. For young people at that time, the big city presented a throng of potentially experiences, where followers of the courtly life were known to “(sing) the pleasures of drinking, hunting, and loving.”⁴

The more noble pursuit of his studies was informed by the Humanism new to his time. No longer was learning limited to the abstract, calculated logic of medieval literature. Instead, his professors taught the more colorful, life-like tales about the ancients. In that world of higher education, the young student encountered pagan influences that exalted a life lived according to nature not grace, and secular stories of passionate action absent any religious asceticism. Surely, his pious mother did not bring him up to think or live that way!

In addition to his prescribed curriculum, Francis would, on his own, stroll over to the Sorbonne to take in lectures in Theology.⁵ There he encountered another jarring contrast.

³ The chronology of Francis’s studies in Paris is not clear. According to A. Ravier, *Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint* (translated by Joseph Bowler, OSFS) (Ignatius Press, 1988), beginning at age twelve, he studied “grammar” from October 1578 to August 1581, then the humanities, including rhetoric, from October 1581 to August 1584, then the “liberal arts” and philosophy from October 1584 to January 1588, following which he worked toward his license (the “master of arts”), which he completed in the summer of 1588.

⁴ Cited in E.J. Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, the Thinker, His Influence*, 2 vols. (translated by Rory O’Sullivan) (Bangalore, India: SFS Publications, 1986), I:56.

⁵ Francis refers to these lectures in his *Treatise on the Love of God*, book XI, chapter 11. The interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles proposed to Francis was taught by the famous Benedictine scholar, Gilbert Générard.

On the one hand, he listened to raging disputations on the theory of pre-destination, in which God seemed arbitrarily to choose who would suffer eternal damnation, or not. On the other hand, Francis also heard fascinating lessons about the biblical Cantic of Canticles, the Song of Songs in which God was portrayed as joining with humanity in the historical unfolding of an eternal story of love. Now the poor lad was thoroughly confused!

Then the decisive event takes place, in the winter of 1586-1587. Francis was only nineteen years old, yet this would be the lowest point in his whole life.

He finally acknowledged, at least to himself, the weakness of flesh and spirit that he so painfully felt. He knew all too well the temptations that life in Paris offered, even to the point of being tricked by his companions into visiting a house of ill repute. He knew all too well his own temperament, with its flashes of anger, as evidenced in more than one sword fight in which he was involved. He knew all too well that his pious exercises and scrupulous penances were of no real use because the gnawing reality of his own human desires would not give way to his craving for holiness.

And so, Francis fell into a deep despair, which lasted some six weeks. As St. Jane de Chantal later testified during the inquiry for his canonization, he "was tried by a state of extreme mental anguish (which) made him go cold with fear."⁶ In fact, he became convinced, in mind and heart and soul, that he, too, was among the number destined for hell, where he would have no power to love God. And this conviction became an obsession. Fixated on the idea "of being for all eternity the enemy of God,"⁷ he was unable to eat or to sleep with any regularity.

Then it happened. As was his custom when returning from classes, he stopped into the Church of St. Etienne-des-grès. There, kneeling in desperate prayer before the statue of the Black Madonna, *Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance*, he said these words:

Whatever may happen, O God, you who hold all things in your hand, whose ways are *justice and truth*, whatsoever you may have decreed concerning me in the eternal secret of your predestination and reprobation, you whose judgments are unfathomable, you who are ever Just Judge and Merciful Father, I will love you always, O Lord, at least in this life! At least in this life will I love you, if it is not given me to love you in eternity!⁸

⁶ Elisabeth Stopp, *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal* (Hyattsville, MD: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967), pp. 44-45.

⁷ Cited in Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales*, I:68.

⁸ Cited in Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales*, I:71.

Then he recited the "Memorare." When he finished praying, the crisis was over; the fear had passed and his despair subsided. As St. Jane recounts, "His troubles, so it seemed to him, had fallen about his feet like a leper's scales."⁹ Afterward, he promised to pray the Rosary every day.

No one knows for certain what actually caused this traumatic episode. It may have been physical fatigue, his many youthful endeavors finally catching up to him. It may have been intellectual consternation, unable to resolve the theological debates that left him so perplexed. It may have been a psychological problem, with his naturally high anxiety yielding a destructive force on his delicate conscience.

Whatever the cause, this crisis led Francis to a spiritual "conversion." No longer would he seek holiness in the experience of religious fervor. Instead, he realizes that whatever good he can muster, and whatever bad he might suffer, are far and away surpassed by the mercy of God. What an incredible insight for anyone, let alone a nineteen-year-old!

In the years that followed, Francis would continue to reflect on his experience, and he would formulate more profound thoughts on the subject which he wrote down for the benefit of others – including we who celebrate this Jubilee of hope.

Salesian Christian Humanism

What Francis taught, at least a brief version of it, can be summarized as an expression of "Salesian Christian Humanism" – with each of those terms contributing to his spirituality of hope.

From his education in Humanism, Francis de Sales learned to explore thoughts about life from the starting point of our experience – in this case, the common human quest for happiness.

All people want to be happy. We all try to be happy. And yet, nothing we try completely fulfills that wish, nothing ultimately rewards the effort. In truth, nothing could, because what human beings desire – be it happiness or meaning or fulfillment – is beyond our ability to acquire, indeed, beyond anything this world can offer us. As a result, we might consider ourselves hapless, and sometimes hopeless.

That realization – and the frustration that accompanies it – raises a broader and more fundamental question about human nature itself: Are human beings fundamentally bad and have to try really hard to be good? Or are people essentially good, though occasionally they do bad, sometimes very bad?

⁹ Stopp, *A Testimony*, p. 45.

Throughout history, many thinkers have taken the view that humans are inherently depraved; as a result, they claim that helplessness is built into life as we know it. They believe this on the basis of the idea that original sin has totally corrupted all human existence, making us incapable of knowing and living a truly good life.

In such a state, people cannot really be happy; because of that original sin, all humans have been consigned to a life of absurdity. All are inherently frustrated, as was the mythic Sisyphus, who so angered the gods that he was condemned to a lifetime of rolling a boulder up a hill only to have it roll down again once he got to the top.¹⁰ So, too, it seems, we spend much time and energy trying to rise above life’s struggles, but failing along the way; then all we can do is to start over, only to fail once again. Mortal, human existence becomes the endless repetition of this cycle.

But Francis de Sales thinks otherwise, and he does so precisely because of the human experience of failing to be happy all the time.

In his Christian Humanism, Francis considers the desire for perfection to be an “ineluctable aspiration,”¹¹ one that both defines and transcends human history. The constant striving for happiness, even when we fail to find it, discloses a built-in human tendency toward what is infinite.

To Francis, this desire, this aspiration, this tendency reveals what he calls a “natural inclination to love God above all things”¹² – because there is no thing in this world that gives people the happiness they seek. Put simply, we long for union with God (even if we do not know it), for God alone can give us the fulfillment we so desire.

The flip side of this realization about human longing is the particularly Christian view of divine being – which sees God as the perfection of all goodness. Lasting happiness, then, transcends this world; to experience it is to participate in that perfect goodness that *is* God through eternal union with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In this faith perspective, Francis considers Creation to be the act of a beneficent God, who fashioned humanity (and all things) not because God needed to, but for our sake and for our fulfillment.

¹⁰ See A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (Vintage, 1991).

¹¹ W. Marceau, *L’Optimisme dans l’Oeuvre de Saint François de Sales* (Paris: Éditions P. Lethielleux, 1973), p. 184: “An ineluctable aspiration, such is the story of all life! Wonderfully undulating and diverse, man pursues dreams of felicity, which he abandons and takes up again, as children change their games. Scarcely has he obtained a long-coveted object, than he perceives its futility and detaches himself from it.”

¹² See his *Treatise on the Love of God*, book 1, chapters 16-18.

He sees the Incarnation of God’s only begotten Son as the epitome of that divine love; in fact, he thinks that Jesus would have been born as the pinnacle of all creation, even if there had not been any original sin from which Christ came to save humanity.

And by virtue of Redemption from sin and death, through the merits of Jesus’s Passion and the power of Pentecost Francis says that human beings now exist in a “state a hundred times better than that of (original) innocence.”¹³

That is the God whom Francis experienced in Paris: the God of truth and justice, before whom the young student chose love over reason, when he decided in that climactic moment to abandon himself into God’s merciful hands.

In doing so – by means of his prayer before the Black Madonna – the future saint both expressed and gained hope. From then on, he approached his life with unfailing confidence not because of who he was, nor because of the worthiness of human nature in general; but as the result of an experience of grace, the grace of understanding that God is love, and of appreciating that God’s love is merciful.

From that transformative human experience, and his understanding of it through the lens of Christian faith, Francis thinks through how anyone can have hope and how hope can have a lasting impact on everyone’s life. In fact, his entire spiritual legacy – all his works and all his writings – features hopefulness as pivotal feature.¹⁴

In that Salesian Christian Humanism, hope is predicated on a reciprocity between humans and God: between our indigence, when it comes to finding fulfillment, and God’s generosity, in enabling us to reach it.

On the one hand, the God who created, redeemed, and sustains humanity never ceases to draw us toward ultimate happiness, even or especially amid the frustration of not experiencing it in this world. To say it differently, God continually inspires us with the grace to seek the fulfillment they so desire.

On the other hand, human beings are invited to respond to that inspiring grace by aspiring to God, by seeking in all things to cooperate with God’s will. Like little birds who, when the wind comes along, have to flap their wings energetically if they want to fly,¹⁵ we have to do our part – by choosing, intentionally and decidedly, to belong to God.

¹³ *Treatise on the Love of God*, book 2, chapter 5.

¹⁴ Marceau, *L’Optimisme*, 263: “All the values of the Renaissance were assumed by the holiness of this master and beyond the joyful asceticism of a spiritual optimism, he invites man to flourish in the only order that suits him: the supernatural order.

¹⁵ See the *Treatise on the Love of God* (*Oeuvres* IV:128-129), cited in Marceau, *L’Optimisme*, 208-209.

That is the choice ever before us: whether or not to freely and fully embrace the divine commandment to love God and love our neighbor. For Francis, the perfection of that choice to love comes when we abandon ourselves completely to the God who first loves us.¹⁶

But everyone knows what a challenge that can be, especially when so much of what we experience in our day-to-day lives runs contrary to the love we profess and the happiness we seek.

So, the question remains: Is hope really possible in this world?

Some think not. Knowing themselves to be sinners, they may feel unworthy of hope because of the endless struggles against the temptations they face and too often give in to.

Saints know this, too. As Francis de Sales puts it, “Our imperfections are going to accompany us to the grave. We can’t go anywhere without having our feet on the ground.”¹⁷

Even so, he sees in the temptations we feel and the sins we commit an opportunity to confide in God. Through humility, we can still hope to make progress toward perfection, by habitually turning and returning to God, trusting every day in God’s grace and mercy. In this way, as Francis advises, we can and should “take care to work toward perfection,” but at the same time “leave arriving at it to God.”¹⁸

Still, all people face a common obstacle to hope – in the melancholy or sadness that they feel at one time or another in life. The common tendency when we run up against life’s difficult challenges is to react with some degree of anxiety or apprehension, which, unchecked, can lead to discouragement and despair. In fact, the saint claims that worrying is the greatest evil humans face, with the exception of sin.¹⁹

That anxiety is what the young Francis experienced during his days in Paris.

Later, as a wise spiritual counselor, he identifies the source of this hopelessness as having “too great a care”²⁰ and concern for things beyond our control. This undue care leads us to get frustrated at the world; and when we consider our own imperfections, we can easily become upset at not being able to achieve what we think we can or should. In turn, imagining

¹⁶ See Marceau, *L’Optimisme*, pp. 240-244.

¹⁷ *Treatise on the Love of God* (*Oeuvres*, IV:128-129) cited in Marceau, *L’Optimisme*, 208-209.

¹⁸ *Spiritual Conferences* (*Oeuvres*, VI:51), cited in Marceau, *L’Optimisme*, 238.

¹⁹ See his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part 4, chapters 11-12.

²⁰ *Spiritual Conferences* (*Oeuvres* VI:48), cited in Marceau, *L’Optimisme*, 237-238.

that life is stacked against us, we lament our human frailty and finitude and, as the saying goes, “worry ourselves to death.”

But hope gives life.

It does so when, instead of allowing our thoughts and emotions to spiral downward, we choose, choose, in love, to raise our minds and hearts to God above.

And St. Francis de Sales has bequeathed us a way to do just that – in the “Direction of Intention.” Through the frequent repetition of this prayer, we can cultivate hope every single day: by offering to God whatever we have to do; by asking God for grace to assist us; and – here’s the key – by promising to accept whatever may happen as an act of complete trust in God, whose eternal Providence intends always to benefit us.²¹

In sum, Salesian spirituality holds that hope begins with the adoption of a fundamental viewpoint about life, when we choose to look upon ourselves (and others) as fallible human beings who, nevertheless, are still essentially good, and when we consider God to be the perfection of love, the one who eternally desires and continually draws us toward that love as our ultimate happiness.

Based on that foundation, hope grows and develops each time we abandon ourselves to the Good Pleasure of God’s will for us, as it is manifest in the realities of daily life. We do this when we learn to live by the prayer that Jesus uttered as his final words on the Cross, words that we should say at the beginning and end of each day: “Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). For St. Francis de Sales, that prayer and that action express the purest form of love, which, in turn, gives rise to perfect hope.

And the experience of that hope will enable us always to be at peace. As the most popular of St. Francis de Sales’s golden counsels puts it: hope enables us to “not think about what will happen tomorrow, for the same Father who takes care of you today will look out for you tomorrow and always. Either he will keep you from evil or he will give you invincible courage to endure it.”

So, by entrusting ourselves and our daily efforts into the hands of a loving God, rather than relying solely on our own abilities or on the promises of this world, we, too, can experience the hope that gives purpose and direction to life.

And, as we know from the example of St. Francis de Sales himself and so many other Salesian saints, *that hope does not disappoint.*

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²¹ For a more thorough treatment of the working of this spiritual exercise, see my *Live Today Well: St. Francis de Sales’s Simple Approach to Holiness* (Sophia Institute Press, 2015), pp. 67-76.