



Saint Francis de Sales

January 24th marked the feast of the patron of our Diocese, St. Francis de Sales. He is a very good man to have on our side. In the three centuries since his death, the gentleness and practical wisdom of his teaching have spread throughout the Church, and his influence is very much alive today. Every morning I take strength from his words.

Born in France of a noble family in 1567 and very well educated, Francis surprised his father (who had definite plans for his highly talented son) by becoming a priest and then bishop (at age 35). At that time the line of division between Catholics and Protestants was less than 100 years old, but the young and genial Bishop of Geneva fearlessly crossed over it to engage his opponents in respectful dialogue that drew thousands back to the Church. His peaceful spirit prepared the way for the ecumenical openness that flowed from the Second Vatican Council 350 years later.

Our patron was party to one of the great friendships of Christian history—the one he enjoyed with St. Jane de Chantal. With her as leader he founded and guided the Sisters of the Visitation. Their many letters to each other reveal how their deep mutual affection drew them to become ever more truly themselves in Christ, the Friend of the friends of God.

St. Francis' best-known writing is to be found in his classic *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Unlike previous spiritual works, it was not written for priests or religious. Rather, St. Francis composed it specifically for lay people, to invite them to seek holiness amid the concrete circumstances of ordinary daily life. Its chapters are short enough to be fit into a busy daily schedule, and they are filled with examples from nature and neighborhood that bring his wisdom home and make it imitable. If you're looking for direction in your spiritual life, you cannot do better than to take this book in hand. By the time you set it down, you will have Francis de Sales for a friend.

The effect St. Francis had on others can be seen in the testimony of a very good judge of character who knew him briefly near the end of his life (he died in 1622 at the age of 55). "This servant of God conformed so well to the divine pattern," St. Vincent de Paul said, "that often I asked myself with amazement how a created being . . . could reach so high a degree of perfection. Going over his words in my mind, I have been filled with such admiration that I am moved to see in him the man who, of all others, has most faithfully reproduced the love of the Son of God on earth."

High praise indeed for the saint God has given to be our patron in the Diocese of Baker. What if we could get to know him better? What if we could see in him what St. Vincent saw?