



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Lent 2023

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

On December 28, 2022, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, issued an Apostolic Letter marking the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Francis de Sales. The document, entitled *Totum Amoris Est*, is a beautiful reflection on this wonderful saint.

St. Francis de Sales was the Bishop of Geneva during the Reformation. The city had embraced the schismatic teachings of John Calvin. St. Francis de Sales' approach was not typical of the time. Rather than use words that condemned, he struck a conciliatory tone by teaching the truth with gentleness and love to these people. He once said 'you can attract more flies with a spoonful of honey rather than a barrel full of vinegar'. Many people returned to the faith because he offered the sweet honey of God's love, rather than the sour vinegar of harsh condemnation. At the time of his death, many had returned to the Catholic Faith.

In his Apostolic Letter, Pope Francis refers to one of St. Francis de Sales' great spiritual works entitled "Introduction to the Devout Life". A significant theme found in this book is what the Second Vatican Council has called, 'the universal call to holiness'. St. Francis understood that we are called to a life of true devotion wherever we may find ourselves in the world. He states, "Devotion must be practiced differently by the gentleman, the craftsman, the chamberlain, the prince, the widow, the young woman, the wife" (Introduction to the Devout Life). Commenting on this quote, Pope Francis states, "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 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" (*Totum Amoris Est*).

The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. It provides us with an opportunity, as Pope Francis states, "to live in the midst of the secular city while nurturing the interior life". We have an opportunity to grow in holiness by embracing the three traditional pillars of prayer, fasting and almsgiving as a means of spiritual transformation during Lent. We can also attend daily Mass and make the effort to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance, especially if it has been a long time. On Saturday, March 25, this sacrament will be offered in all our parishes throughout the diocese from ten o'clock in the morning until two o'clock in the afternoon.

I also recommend that you do some spiritual reading this Lent. Perhaps you could read Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter, *Totum Amoris Est* (twelve pages) or one of the books of St. Francis de Sales such as "Introduction to the Devout Life" or another beautiful book "Treatise on the Love of God". They are timeless treasures that help us respond to God's call to holiness.

It is my hope and prayer that all our Lenten efforts will move us to have a greater love for God and neighbour for "the measurement of love is to love without measure" (Treatise on Divine Love).

Yours sincerely in Christ,

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Bishop of St. Catharines

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