

Sometimes in life, it can be easy to give up when the going gets tough. We face a tough situation with a job or at school, and convince ourselves it's too hard. We face a difficult individual, maybe even a rebellious child and a parent may say it's not worth fighting over. Or we look at the decisions so many make in the world, choosing things that are morally evil, and we think what's the point, they won't listen to me, or they'll mock or label me. But remember what we say at the end of Mass: that now is the time to glorify the Lord by our lives and to announce the Gospel. In essence, now is the time to get to work.

And lest we think that the current situation before us is somehow the worst of all time, with polarization, so many people turning away from the faith or having no religion at all and seemingly so much selfishness out there, what we have to remember is there was no golden era in human civilization. Ever since original sin entered the picture as we reflected on last week, humanity has had plenty of problems. But inside us all is the capacity to change the world for the better when we, as Paul tells us, bear our share of hardships for the Gospel, and go down the mountain into the world and get to work. We might not change the world overnight, but we can make a profound impact.

Five hundred years ago, Francis de Sales lived during a time that made the polarization we have today look like the disagreement between a Vikings and Packers fan. He was a saint who lived in one of the most turbulent times in human history. The Church and the world plummeted into crisis. The Protestant Revolution split Europe into warring factions. In the wake of Martin Luther's preaching, Germany erupted in a revolt among the peasants that ended in terrible slaughter.

England and the northern Scandinavian European countries became largely Protestant faith while the rest of Europe held to Catholicism, with some countries like Germany divided by region. The tensions eventually broke out in the Thirty Years' War from 1618–1648.

As Europe was reeling 500 years ago from the most radical revolution it had ever faced, God raised up a saint who showed the way through a crisis. It was not through anger, violence, and revenge, but through kindness, gentleness, and forgiveness, and a lot of hard work.

Francis de Sales was born on Aug. 21, 1567, in southwestern France — an area that had been swept by Calvinist fervor. His family were land-owning aristocrats, and Francis' father planned for his oldest son to receive the finest education to prepare him to be a lawyer.

When he was 16, Francis traveled to Paris to receive a liberal arts education. The work was hard; there were college studies at a University and then advanced studies at two more colleges where he earned a doctorate in civil and canon law. He also studied theology.

When he was 17, he took part in a theological discussion about predestination — the Calvinist doctrine that God chooses some to be saved and some to be condemned. Francis entered a crisis of faith, believing that he was not one of the elect. The worries shifted him into a depression that made him physically ill.

Three years later, while visiting a church in Paris, he came out of that dark tunnel of doubt and had a profound experience of God's mercy. He knew God was love, and focusing on the Blessed Virgin, he dedicated his life to God and the priesthood.

He had plenty of offers for a posh life in political office and indeed his dad hoped he'd be a lawyer and take the "good" life. But he felt called to the priesthood, and after completing his studies, Francis returned to his home territory, which was part of the Diocese of Geneva. Geneva was the center of the Protestant religion of John Calvin, and a majority of the population had left the Catholic faith for the new religion. Francis was ordained in 1593. Just 26, he was immediately offered a position at the Geneva cathedral by Bishop Claude de Granier. As provost, Francis held an important post in the diocese, but not having parish responsibilities, he was able to embark on an ambitious program of apologetics and evangelization among the Calvinists. So rather than preach to the choir, he got to work.

Going to announce the Gospel and bearing his hardship for the sake of it wasn't easy. For six years he struggled with little success and tremendous opposition. The Protestants not only vowed to close their ears to his preaching, but he had to take refuge in a castle because of repeated assassination threats and attempts. In 1599 he was promoted to be coadjutor of the diocese and was sent on a mission to preach at the court of King Henry IV of France. He made a strong impression, and it was no surprise that, when Bishop Granier died in 1602, Francis de Sales was appointed bishop of Geneva.

To put Francis de Sales in the wider context, the Reformation had been going on for nearly a century when he was a priest and bishop; the two sides were angry and resentful and resentment, revenge, and retaliation ruled the day. Perhaps a bit like today in some respects with how we treat one another on different political or religious sides. There had to be another way though, and Francis de Sales pioneered a different path. He met everyone with kindness, reminding them that "a spoonful of honey gathers more flies than a barrel full of vinegar." He was a passionate and eloquent preacher, speaking tirelessly about the simplicity, goodness, truth, and beauty of the Catholic faith. He worked hard to make sure the clergy and people in his own diocese were faithful. He rooted out corruption and indifference and worked with apostolic zeal to purify and renew the Church. He visited 450 parishes in his diocese, helped reform monasteries, and focused on helping the young to learn the faith. He'd hear confessions for hours at a time, and rather than fearing Calvinists (the same ones making the threats against him) he'd dialogue with them and try to change hearts and minds. He'd also write, writing two major works on God's love and how to grow in holiness. He also helped found an order of sisters to help care for girls and widows.

He brought Franciscans to work in the diocese, and in the spirit of his namesake, he lived in chastity and poverty. One of the stories about Francis de Sales is that St. Francis of Assisi appeared to him and said: "You desire martyrdom, just as I once longed for it. But, like me, you will not obtain it. You will have to become an instrument of your own martyrdom."

In his writing, he taught that holiness was possible for all people, both laypeople and clergy. He also helped people to understand the loving nature of God, not the harsh, judgmental God that Calvinism preached and that led him to his own crisis of faith. He died at the age of 55, living a life of constantly trying to help others come to know the true God, and not using the weapons of war or becoming entrenched with like minded people, but knowing that his job was to seek out the lost sheep.

He's a remarkable saint, and what he goes to show you is each of us has a job to do, and this Second Sunday of Lent's readings remind us that it's time to get to work, and give us a blueprint for how to do the job.

The starting point is Abram, who of course becomes Abraham; the key word is "Go" "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you." God calls us all, each of us on a mission. So where is God calling us? It's something we need to think about throughout our lives. We always have to be listening. God is always telling us to "go" from where we are most comfortable: familiar beliefs, ideas, surrounds, and people. But this has a promise. God will make us a "great nation" like Abram; God has such great things in store for us but we can't be afraid to take the leap. Francis de Sales could have had a comfortable posh life as a nobleman's son; but he listened and in the process found true happiness.

Second, we have to go up the mountain to journey with God. Francis de Sales said "half an hour's meditation each day is necessary - except when you are busy. Then a full hour is needed." Prayer is such an important part of our lives; as I've mentioned priests take a vow to pray daily the Liturgy of the Hours and I'm thankful for that vow, because how often it would be easy for me to skip prayer or say my work is my prayer, or I had Mass today that's enough. All of us need quiet time for prayer and contemplation so we can discern how we are carrying out that mission, and get the strength for it. We need to heed the words of the Father, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him." Do we do this or are we too busy with the noise of our daily lives to hear what Jesus is telling our hearts and souls?

Lastly, we take up our cross and follow our Lord. It's not easy to go on the mission God has called us to do. You said "yes" to marriage, great. You said yes to loving your spouse; to forgiving; to working through things; to thinking of their needs and challenging them and being challenged by them; to sacrifice for the family. You said "yes" to being a parent. Great, but with the ball games and fun moments comes the blow ups, the having to be mom and dad vs. friend, the need for patience, the need to understand one child differs from the other and even you, and they aren't a clone of you as Francis de Sales' own father had to come to realize. You said "yes" to a particular

career, great, but with that comes the school work and studying for tests to get through school. And all of us said “yes” to being a Christian. Wonderful. But with that comes growing in holiness and looking at ourselves, and not being afraid to go out and be an evangelist like Francis de Sales, sometimes hated when you say this is immoral, this is not right. The 3 apostles see a foretaste of the resurrection, but they are also called to go down the mountain. We can’t remain on the mountain because we aren’t in heaven yet. We have to get to work. So our job is to take the tents down not put them up, and cover people who are in need of God’s spiritual and physical care like Francis de Sales did. Maybe it’s your spouse or kids or parents; maybe it’s your coworker or neighbor; maybe it’s the person who has a grudge against you or someone you can’t stand who is coming from a place of anger about something else in their lives. Whoever it might be, all of us need to get to work.

Sometimes it’s easy to look back with nostalgia on the “good old days,” and to be sure, there was a lot of good in the good old days. But while we can still look back, we must remember too that ever since original sin entered the picture, every age has had its share of problems. And God does not call us to look back, but to look forward. He looks at what He has created and sees it as good, and wants us to make a difference in this world so people can come to know the God who is love. So with Him next to us, may we not be afraid to go down the mountain and get to work.