**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

25TH OF JANUARY FRANCIS DE SALES

25TH OF JANUARY THE CONVERSION OF PAUL

28TH OF JANUARY THOMAS AQUINAS

30TH OF JANUARY CHARLES I

31ST OF JANUARY JOHN BOSCO

FRANCIS de SALES [1567-1622] – Francis was one of the most loveable and attractive of the saints. He used to say: ‘honey attracts more flies than vinegar,’ but his extraordinarily affable personality and manner in no way compromised his message.

He was born in the duchy of Savoy of a noble family. At this time Savoy was an independent state and Francis spent his whole life in service on behalf of the duke, insofar as his political allegiance went.

The majority of his early education took place at the Jesuit school in Paris, where, as a an aristocrat, he was taught fencing and horsemanship as well as imbibing a thorough grounding in the classics according to the most advanced humanist principles. It soon became evident to the school authorities that Francis showed extraordinary religious sensitivity, and he was placed in charge of a Marian fellowship, one of the qualifications for this responsibility being his willingness to undergo the ‘spiritual exercises,’ which influenced his formation very deeply.

His father had intended him for the law, and sent him to Padua, where in addition to the usual legal training he took on the study of canon law. During his student days whilst out at night he was attacked, by a gang, but drew his rapier and managed to see them off; not something you would associate with a gentle saint, but he had a fiery streak which he needed to take in hand, although there was surely no censure for his having defended himself.

It became clear quite early on that Francis had a calling to the priesthood, and he was ordained once he had received his father’s approval. Being of noble blood practice at the time was that Francis would be fast-tracked, and he was appointed co-adjutor to the Bishop of Geneva, and at the bishop’s death he took on the position himself.

As Bishop of Geneva Francis brought about many reforms and did what he could to rebuild French spirituality after the wars of religion, for instance, by supporting the installation in France of the reformed Carmelites of Teresa of Avila; bringing in the Oratorians, being, as he was, a great admirer of St Charles Borromeo, the former Archbishop of Milan, who had done so much to educate and catechise children and set up seminaries for the training of priests. It was as a preacher, however, that he really shone, and it was during one of his Lenten sermons, preached at Dijon by special invitation, that he first encountered Jane de Chantal.

Geneva had been the seat of Calvin and Calvinism since mid-century, and that the movement was fortunate that Calvin himself was succeeded in office by his equally competent and long-serving assistant Theodore Beza. A former Bishop of Geneva had been chased out decades previously and had moved his seat to Annecy, in Savoy. Francis undertook several conferences with Beza, but with no apparent success, so that the Duke entrusted him and a colleague with the recovery of as many souls as possible into the Roman fold. This was an important lesson for Francis, because his partner went on the offensive and angrily threatened damnation and hell fire, without any noticeable results, whereas Francis became ‘good cop’ and seems to have brought back about 70.000 converts, many as the result of a campaign of pamphleteering.

The sum total of these pamphlets have been worked after Francis’ death into a book entitled ‘Catholic controversies’ which is a good deal less well known than his other major works, ‘An Introduction to the Devout Life,’ which was preceded by his ‘Treatise on the Love of God.’ this latter is less well known, and a good deal longer, opening, also, as it does, with some rather dry theology before getting into Francis’ more usual and eminently readable prose. His works are esteemed by French literary critics from all subsequent ages as some of the finest in the language.

Francis himself had suffered severe mental and spiritual reverses over predestination while still a youth and had not found peace until experiencing a major turmoil before a statue of Mary, the upshot being that, whilst he understood that he would never know God’s will in this world, he came to trust that by living a life of love and self-sacrifice he could assure himself of God’s goodness and justice.

A major pillar in Francis’ ministry was founded in Matthew ch11, where Jesus invites his followers to come to him; that he is gentle; his yoke easy and his burden light, but it is vital to understand that this gambit in no way compromised his portrayal of Jesus; quite the contrary: in his writings he leads his readers by gentle but very sound steps into the duties of authentic devotion, but he does so not by force or fear, but by deploying the advantages of his gentle and affectionate nature and with a self-understanding that arose from his own serious religious ordeal: it was his optimistic spiritual vision, based in sound contemporary theology, that sealed his ministry with success.

‘By your fruits…’ was never truer than in the case of Francis. Apart from the necessary work of a bishop, he had a real gift as a spiritual director, and his interest as a nobleman, living very much in the world Francis encouraged his directees to grow into the people God intended them to be, as they were and precisely where they were, without seeking to change their outward circumstances. This kind of spirituality was relatively new, though it had been pioneered of late by the Jesuits and Oratorians, and, unlike the Beguine Movements of the Middle Ages, Francis saw no necessity for anybody to move into a community set aside for the purpose, in order to grow in holiness. The availability of top quality spiritual direction to the laity of whatever social standing was a true democratisation of a path set out over previous centuries solely for clergy and Religious, and stands at the source of practically all such modern initiatives, not least of all those who attempted to follow in Francis’ own footsteps by means of various ‘Salesian’ foundations. According to Francis the shepherd in his hut was as well able to achieve the highest holiness available to him as was the Baroness in her salon if each was willing.

Last month there was an article about one of Francis’ principal directees, Jane de Chantal, and together they founded the order of the visitation, intended as a retreat house for women of every class, including married women who simply needed to make a short retreat. Unfortunately, outside his diocese Francis found himself powerless to overcome the opposition to this enlightened open-door facility and had to agree to the foundation becoming a closed order.

Francis’ very tender and productive relationship with Jane is documented elsewhere, and despite opposition from more conservative elements in the church, he became particularly successful and productive in his attention to the direction of women, of whom Jane was only one of the most significant. He also, incidentally, had a hand in directing St Vincent de Paul, and Vincent’s colleague [St] Louise de Marillac, but it was to another Louise, Mme Chastel, to whom he dedicated his ‘Introduction to the Devout Life’ in 1607.

There exists a whole collection of his letters to Jane, and to Louise de Chastel in addition to others, all of which illustrate Francis’ affection and tenderness particularly to women, so much so that he advised Jane to keep other curious eyes from reading them in case their intention should be misunderstood.

Francis maintained that any individual who so wished, could achieve holiness in whatever situation in life they may find themselves. When he and Jane first met she was keen to extricate herself from the impossible situation in which she found herself, but Francis encouraged her to accept and make friends with her situation as a widow, which proved to be the stable foundation for her later growth. He invented a term ‘Unidiverse,’ similar in both French and English, meaning that the whole of Christendom is made up of people in diverse situations in time and place, and that each one of us should strive to become the best person we can without needing to emulate anybody else, or to wish for other peoples’ gifts or talents. Charles Gore built on this idea when he wrote that: ‘God does not wish you to do extraordinary things; he wishes you to do ordinary things extraordinarily well.’

In the very best practice and tradition of spiritual direction Francis was keen that his directees learn, as he put it to Jane, to ‘build a monastery within themselves’ and to become independent of his teaching, knowing, as he did, that he would not be around forever. So it was that, in 1622 and in very poor health, Jane broke her retreat to visit and take care of him: before his death he made arrangements for Vincent to take on Jane’s direction.

Francis was beatified in 1661 and canonised in 1666.

By far his most famous and best-loved writings was his ‘Introduction,’ that went into thirty languages by the time of his death, and which even King James read with approval. It is quite uncontroversial and read by adherents of most of the mainstream of the Christian church. It is short, eminently readable, practical and clear, containing a series of good workable prayers and ways to place yourself mentally and spiritually in God’s presence. There are many editions available including several on Audible. It is still esteemed as one of the very greatest spiritual writings of the entire Christian tradition, formerly alongside the ‘Imitation,’ which has gone right out of fashion for a number of good reasons.

Francis himself did not found any specifically Salesian order, but later disciples and adherents, particularly in C19 carried on and adapted his practice and principles to found their own Salesian orders which now operate worldwide.

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THE CONVERSION of ST PAUL – There is no clue in Acts as to when Paul’s conversion occurred in relation to the end of Jesus’ ministry. Jerome Murphy O’Connor, who wrote extensively about Paul, even suggests that the coming together of the apostles after the crucifixion may have taken several years. At all events it is not until the early 50’s ce that Paul’s earliest letter, to the Galatians, is generally agreed to have been written. What needs to be established and understood here is that, as Robert Atwell points out, the dramatic happenings on the road to Damascus, if they took place at all in the way Luke relates, was merely the beginning of a long and complicated process.

Those who recall Billy Graham may retain images of people leaving their seats at his gatherings and walking to the front as converts. Graham himself always understood that this was merely the beginning of a conversion, and always had a phalanx of counsellors at hand to mentor and guide those who found the courage to come forward.

William James, in his famous ‘Varieties of Religious Experience’ suggests that a conversion can be seen in terms of a many-sided figure – let’s say a hexagon, which looks exactly the same when turned upside-down as in its original position; in other words that a conversion as such can occur with no noticeable change in the convert’s personality, behaviour or attitudes, and that a true conversion involves a change of heart that inevitably brings about such internal adaptations. .

Paul was what political commentators nowadays call ‘a man in a hurry.’ Everything he cites in ch3 of his letter to the Philippians is to be taken at face value, the only difficulty being that he was an outsider, coming into Jerusalem from Tarsus, and we know enough about class distinction to understand that an honours degree from Oxbridge and rich parents often fail to convince the establishment you’re ‘the right sort.’ This was part of Paul’s problem.

Another major factor in Paul’s back-story is that whilst he did, indeed, have one of the best tutors around in Gamaliel, that teacher is better known for having challenged the Sanhedrin when they were otherwise unanimously agreed that the followers of this nuisance had to be supressed. You recall Gamaliel’s warning: ‘Other sois-disant prophets have come and gone, so we can hope these people get tired and go back home in time, but if not, we could be in danger of setting ourselves up against God himself.’ There must have been doubts rankling at the back of Paul’s mind that initially drove on his bigotry, but which eventually manifested itself in the ‘road to Damascus’ breakdown. ‘If you don’t deal with your emotions, they will deal with you!’ and the same warning should apply to dealing with potential cracks in our certainties.

It is difficult to be sure about Paul’s sight loss and subsequent healing by Ananias when the Gospels so frequently employ blindness with a spiritual meaning. Next he escapes the religious authorities in Damascus and spends three years with King Aretas and the Arabs, though we cannot be sure precisely where that might have been, or who Aretas was, but it probably signifies an extended desert retreat akin to that of Jesus.

One way and another it is possible to discern the ‘man in a hurry’ when we meet Paul in Antioch at the inception of what we call HIS first missionary journey, which was, in fact, supposedly conducted under the leadership of the more senior and perhaps more grounded and reliable Barnabas.

It is not difficult when reading Galatians to realise that Paul had little enough real respect for the church leadership in Jerusalem once his credibility had actually been acknowledged by the apostles: ‘Least of the apostles’ as he terms himself is just a bit of an exaggeration; others might call it ‘a cheek,’ given that he not only never met Jesus, but had little enough to say about his specific teachings, and, indeed, occasionally even presents his own take, for example, on marriage, as being ‘from the Lord.’ So one might wonder what Paul meant by ‘The Gospel’ if not his own actual formulations.

This said, there can be no serious doubt about Paul’s achievements, his motives or spirituality, nor, for that matter, that God created him with all the personal dynamism and intelligence necessary to be a very great leader; neither can we doubt his self-sacrifice. What does seem to emerge, however, from even a cursory examination of his portrayals in the New Testament is that Paul seems not to have lost either his superego or his sharp elbows, but that he most certainly allowed God to transform them into his own service.

Paul’s conversion illustrates the point that while some important changes of outlook and behaviour must occur in order to validate its authenticity, such transformations are rarely complete, and that aspects of the personality that have served to support previous conduct can now be taken over, redirected and pressed into serving the new cause. What this illustrates in Paul’s case goes for everybody: that true conversion requires patient and prayerful self-examination, usually with the support and counsel of others, rather than being taken for granted, perhaps similarly to the work necessary for maturing the initial impetus after having fallen in love.

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KING CHARLES I was publicly beheaded on January 30th 1649.

He was not the first English monarch to be done away with, but he was the first to suffer judicial execution; some call it judicial murder, and a recent book ‘Killers of the king,’ recounts the extraordinary lengths agents of Charles’ son went to at the restoration in chasing up and seeing off those who affixed their signatures to the warrant of execution pursuing individuals for decades afterwards as far afield as America.

In effect what occurred was a military coup, since the majority of the long Parliament were set against executing the King, for all that they had suffered his threats and bullying for years previously, and no senior judges at the time wished to be associated with what was a trial in name only.

Perhaps it is at this point that we might examine what it is that the church is intending to mark by means of this calendar. We commemorate many people who are recognised throughout the main body of the Christian church as saints; people such as Francis de Sales and Thomas Aquinas, to take examples from this week alone. The church also chooses to commemorate individual apostles, very occasionally in pairs, because there are only a handful of whom we know anything at all: Matthias, the one rather needlessly appointed to replace Judas Iscariot is a case in point. Others, such as Barnabas, Timothy and Titus are better documented than some of the apostles and were canonised, in tribute to their faith and service to God through the ministry of St Paul.

Tyndale and Wycliffe, on the other hand, were not canonised, although they are important figures in English political and church history whereas Thomas More and Cranmer are celebrated as martyrs. Other great figures are commemorated, such as Luther and Calvin because their lives and achievements are important landmarks in the history of the Christian church in the west. Bishops such as William Temple and Charles Gore deserve their commemorations for their contributions to church and community life in their time. There is a noticeable shortage of women and apart from the numerous festivals associated with Mary such few women as were included are either missionaries or social reformers.

Among all these people whose lives and achievements we commemorate and celebrate a handful turn out either to have been significantly compromised by sin, or by aspects of a truly unprepossessing character, such as Jerome or Cyril of Alexandria, but these are people whose contribution to the church is beyond dispute even if we ask ourselves how their conduct qualified them as saints. We also know that many other significantly high achievers, like Meister Eckhart, Peter Abelard and Origen have not been put forward because some of their opinions were considered less than orthodox in their times.

Charles suffered from several very unenviable personal disadvantages: he was only just five feet tall; stammered all his life and was arrogant and rigidly self-righteous; but in fairness he truly believed that he was God’s representative in the British isles, and could therefore have been likely to take a lot for granted and to see his opponents as much as many political leaders do today.

A little while before taking the throne in 1625 he and his father’s ‘favourite’ Buckingham went incognito to Madrid to try to court the Spanish infanta with disastrous and highly embarrassing results both personally and diplomatically. It is difficult to imagine that his foreign policy could sink any lower, but Charles’ government brought off that achievement by interfering in the affairs of his brother-in-law, the so-called ‘winter king’ who was booted out of Prague during the 30-years War. The fact that Parliament was reluctant to hand Charles the right to raise taxes for this and other adventures, by various unconstitutional means merely dug Charles into a hole and after having tried to rule without Parliament chickens flew home to roost on steroids.

Charles I is generally lauded for having purchased the majority of the most valuable items in the royal art collection, whilst pursuing a disastrous foreign policy and bringing about a one civil war in the first instance because Parliament refused to ratify his means of raising taxes to cover this improvidence; and for starting a second civil war as a direct consequence of having broken his word to his captors. It is estimated that 160,000 men died in these wars. He appointed a minister to whom he gave a free hand to perpetrate atrocities in Ireland and elsewhere, and then threw him under a bus when it was a question of the minister’s hide or his own. Some weeks ago we dealt with Archbishop William Laud, whose heavy-handed dealings with the church reflected Charles’s own, and whom he also betrayed to execution.

Charles certainly died bravely and went to some lengths to compose a final oration on the scaffold that might encourage the unwary to buy into his own personal spin. Perhaps the best we can say for him is that once he knew he was for the chop he played it to his advantage, but does that constitute martyrdom?

Counsel for Charles’s defence, however, subsists in Mark Kishlansky’s ‘Charles I; an abbreviated life,’ from Penguin, which makes every possible excuse and extenuation for his reign.

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THOMAS ACQUINAS [1224/5-74] was known in his lifetime as ‘the dumb ox,’ and in subsequent generations as ‘The angelic Doctor.’

He was born at his family’s castle at Rocco Sacco near Aquino, between Rome and Naples, and, being the youngest of nine children he was offered at about the age of five, as a child oblate to the famous Benedictine monastery at Monte Casino where his uncle was abbot. Here he was educated until the monastery was occupied in 1239 as a consequence of the war between Pope and Emperor Frederick II, at which point Thomas was sent to the new University of Naples.

At Naples Thomas encountered a Dominican teacher who impressed him sufficiently to wish to join the order. His teacher, realising his talent, decided to send him to the Dominican foundation of Saint Jacques in Paris, to study, but His family objected so strongly that he was kidnapped by his brothers on his way and kept under house arrest in the family castle for about a year. Having given Thomas as an oblate to the Benedictines, the family could anticipate that he might eventually take over as abbot since his uncle already held the post. The Dominicans, on the other hand, were a new and insecure mendicant order. Eventually his mother relented and aided his escape out of a window.

Once he regained his freedom Thomas took the Dominican habit and proceeded to Paris, where he studied under Albert the Great ‘Albertus Magnus,’ another Dominican who became Thomas’s mentor, and took him to Cologne, where Albert was setting up a ‘Studium Generale’ for the brightest and best Dominican students from foreign lands. After four years Albert brought him back to Paris as a ’Bachelor of the Sentences,’ a supervised teaching post. After four years as an apprentice teacher, Thomas would become a ‘magister’ in his own right.

The Sentences were a compilation of various important sayings of some of the principal church fathers that had been collected and codified by a previous scholar, Peter Lombard, a text which became the basis for teaching theology right through to the sixteenth century. Thomas himself had already spent three years as an undergraduate writing his own commentary on the Sentences, which influenced his later work in Summa Theologiae.

The Renaissance and Reformation left mediaeval theology, and particularly the scholastics, with a very tarnished reputation, but in the greater scheme of things, the 12th and 13th centuries saw great achievements in philosophy and theology, which, at the time, were nearly the same thing, except that the division was between pagan and Christian studies. While Thomas was in Naples, however, he had the chance to meet and study with both Hebrew and Arabic scholars, whose philosophical and scientific achievements in the previous centuries had exceeded anything in Europe, particularly in the fields of mathematics, medicine and astronomy. They had access to translations of Aristotle, whose work was considerably less well known, understood and esteemed than that of Plato, on whose disciples much Christian theology had been integrated. The Dominicans were actually in process of integrating what they could of Aristotle with the church’s take on Christian doctrine, so that Thomas had fallen on his feet.

Having completed his apprenticeship as a teacher Thomas became a ‘magister’ in his own right, and remained teaching in Paris until around 1259, when he moved back to Naples where another Studium Generale was being set up. His movements are not known precisely for the next several years, but he travelled around Italy and settled in about 1261 at Orvieto, where he began work on his most famous treatise, the ‘Summa Theologiae.’

Called to Rome, Thomas was asked to compose a liturgy for Corpus Christi, which included the famous hymn ‘Pange lingua gloriosi,’ first given a plainchant melody which has been set any number of times since, including for the C of E.

It was inevitable that Thomas would attract enemies who called him ’the dumb ox,’ and while it is true that a piece had to be cut from the refectory table in order to accommodate his ‘bovinity,’ he had a reputation for speaking only when he felt it necessary to do so. The story goes that during a dinner with Louis IX of France he had remained silent throughout the meal until towards the end he thumped the table with his fist and exclaimed: ‘That will deal with the Manichaeans,’ which evidently did not phase the pious king in the least.

Thomas never completed the ‘Summa …’ He was in process of writing on confession and penance when he stopped, never to pick up his pen again: the remainder of the text was completed by pupils from his other writings. Asked what the matter was, he simply replied that everything he had so far written seemed to him nothing more than straw. We have absolutely no idea to this day what happened to him; whether he suffered a mental or even physical breakdown from the work; whether there was a spiritual or even visionary intervention or whether he realised that he had achieved the limit of what could be said about Christian faith and ethics in words, we simply do not know. What is known for certain is that Thomas died in 1274 barely having reached the age of fifty.

For centuries after his death the church based its theology on the ‘Summa.’ At the time there was every justification for this, because the work is clearly formulated well, throughout and thoroughly codified, so that it is possible to access any topic by quoting its specific reference for those who know their way round. It is available in print, and the first three recordings on Audible go to 52, 48 and 71 hours respectively, and that is only to the end of the second book. There is no flannel; it needs undivided attention, and it is difficult to imagine how one individual could possibly have managed such a feat of systematic thought so clearly expressed.

By consigning the ‘Summa’ to what Seamus Heaney terms ‘official note paper,’ however, the Vatican did itself no favours and certainly reduced Thomas himself to a one-dimensional lexicographer of Catholic doctrine when he is so much more. Had the church travelled a different route and, for example, turned the work of Thomas’s close Franciscan contemporary, St Bonaventure, into its Pravda Sheet, no doubt the same result would have come about for him. It was not until Vatican II that the restriction was lifted, and alternative theologies got a look-in, so it is now permissible to use Thomas’s work as he probably intended, as a basis for further discussion. The whole church owes him a great deal.

Thomas gave himself entirely to his work’ to the church and to God. Given the insecurities in his early life it is not surprising if, having exercised his talent to the uttermost, he may have exhausted himself in one way and another, bringing himself to an early death. There is a martyrdom of love and self-sacrifice besides the red and white martyrdoms assigned by the church.

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JOHN or DON BOSCO [1815-88] came from a very poor peasant family in Piedmont, and after the death of his father when he was two, his mother brought him up in very great poverty. As a young boy, however, John had a vision, enforced from time to time later in his life, of a pandemonium of fighting boys whom he was called upon to help, ‘not with fear, but with gentleness,’ which explains his later affinity with Francis de Sales whose spirit he had encountered during his early schooling at a diocesan seminary under the patronage of both Francis and Philip Neri of the Oratorians.

With the very greatest difficulty John managed to train for ordination, where he came under the influence of the moral theologian Alfonso Cafasso who introduced him to Francis’ ‘Introduction to the devout life.’

After his ordination John worked for two years as a chaplain at a ‘Rifugio’ for country girls who had come to the cities and fallen into prostitution, but he continued with his vision of setting up an Oratory-type facility for the very poorest youths in Turin, where the industrial revolution was already getting underway. He found two houses in an area of Turin where neighbours complained and bitterly opposed the presence of so many disreputable youths congregating together, so that eventually he was helped by the charity of a renounced philanthropic woman, Baroness Barolo, who allocated two large comfortable rooms in a property of her own. John called this foundation a ‘Festive Oratory,’ where, in addition to religious instruction, there were country walks, games and often a snack in the afternoon.

Coming from a background of poverty himself, it appears that John had an unfailing instinct with young people: in time when he realised their illiteracy he set up evening classes; when he realised many had no trade and no means of finding apprenticeship, he set up a vocational and work training centre: he would do anything and employ any willing volunteers to win hearts.

In time John founded fellowships for lay adult men and for lay women, all very much in the spirit of Frances, although canon law at the time restricted the foundation of lay people and clerics working together, and joint fellowships for men and women, but he did what he could within the limitations. By the time of his death John already had a seminarian in training to replace him.

The work of John Bosco with lay people is only one of several instances of Salesian-inspired projects that arose during the nineteenth century in Northern Italy, France, and even America; all part of the Salesian ‘Family.’