

# Spiritual Work of Mercy Counsel the Doubtful

(A Meditation on the Spiritual Work of Mercy, To Counsel the Doubtful)  
excerpts from Msgr. Charles Pope – May 5, 2015

## *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

**“The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aide of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently.” - (2447)**

## *Sacred Scripture*

**“You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim 3:14-16).”**



St. Francis de Sales  
1567 – 1622  
Feast Day – January 24

At first glance, counseling the doubtful may seem rather similar to instructing the ignorant. However, teaching has learning as its goal while counseling aims to assist with decisions. Certainly giving counsel often includes some aspects of teaching, such as providing information and perspective, but its primary purpose is to assist a person in coming to a decision.

We are speaking here of counseling the doubtful as a spiritual work of mercy, the goal in this case refers to that which is moral and rooted in our final end of holiness and salvation. Thus while “counsel” in the general sense could include helping a person decide the best way to repair a car, when speaking of the spiritual work of mercy, such worldly issues are not our focus. Rather, the spiritual work of mercy to “Counsel the doubtful” is concerned with holiness and our goal of dwelling with God in Heaven forever. Finding a “good” way (recta ratio) forward is not mere expedience; it is what is moral, upright, and holy.

The work of giving counsel here is directed to the “doubtful.” Here, too, we need to rescue the word a bit from modern notions, which often associate doubt with skepticism. While a doubtful person may be skeptical of certain truths, “doubt” here is understood in a way that emphasizes the need to make a decision.

The word “doubt” comes from the Latin word *dubius* meaning “uncertain.” However, even more deeply, the word has roots in the Latin word *duo* (two). The Latin word *dubium* is a choice between two things. Even in English there is that strange (silent) “b” in the word “doubt.” This points to another related English word, “double,” which comes from the same Latin root (*dubius*). And thus the doubtful are the undecided, those of two minds on a certain matter, or, more pejoratively, the “double-minded.”

So we have come to a more precise description of the spiritual work of mercy we call “Giving counsel to the doubtful.” It is that work which helps the undecided (or those of two minds on something) to come to a good and upright decision rooted in the call to holiness and the goal of attaining Heaven by God’s grace.

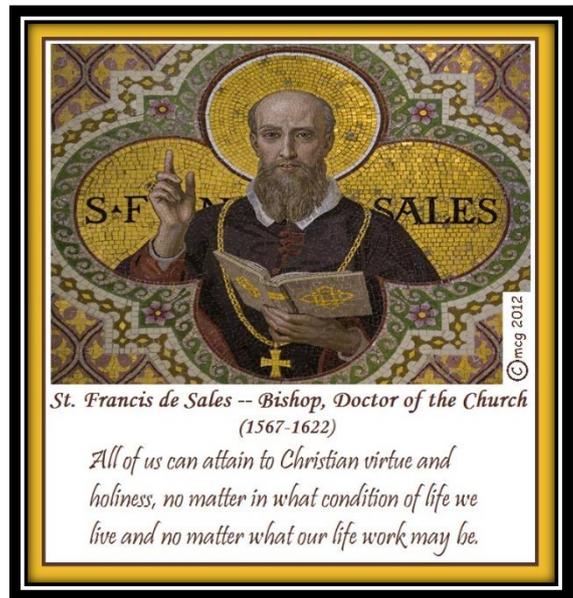
*The English word “counsel” comes from the Latin consilium (con (with) + silium (a decision)). So to counsel means to assist someone in the act of deciding, not just to give vague or generic advice.*

# Counsel the Doubtful

## St. Francis de Sales

### Fast Facts:

Born	• August 21, 1567 in France
Feast Day	• January 24
Canonized	• 1665 by Pope Alexander VII
Patron Saint	• Journalist and Writers



### His Life:

- Francis de Sales was born at Chateau de Sales in Swiss Savoy on August 21, 1567.
- Francis was the eldest of 13 children.
- Francis was obedient, truthful, and generous to those less fortunate. He loved religion and yearned for books and knowledge.
- At the age of 8, he was sent to the nearby college of Annecy and there in the Church of St. Dominic he made his 1<sup>st</sup> Communion and Confirmation.
- At the age of 14, Francis went to the University of Paris the college of Clermont under Jesuit direction.
- It was there that Francis excelled in rhetoric, philosophy and theology.
- It was during this time that his heart became more and more fixed on giving himself to God under the special protection of the Blessed Virgin.
- After 6 years in Paris he was sent to the University of Padua where he was given the degree of Doctor of Law.
- He returned home and it was there that the bishop of Geneva, impressed by Francis character was reported to make this prophetic utterance: "This young man will be a great personage some day! He will become a pillar of the Church and my successor in this see."
- On December 18, 1593 at the age of 26, he was ordained a priest.
- In 1594 Francis was sent to the Chablais, a region of Savoy, which was dominated by Calvinists.
- Francis continually sought new ways to reach the minds of people. He began writing brief leaflets, setting forth dogmas of the Church as opposed to tenets of Calvinism.
- 1601 Francis was made Bishop of Geneva, under the Pontificate of Pope Clement VIII.
- On December 27, 1622 Francis suffered a paralytic seizure. He recovered speech and consciousness and after receiving the Last Sacraments, he murmured words of Scripture, expressing all confidence in God's Mercy.
- Francis died on December 28 – he was 56.
- His Body was brought back to Annecy where it remains.
- He was beatified by Pope Alexander VII in 1661, canonized by him in 1665 and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius IX in 1877.

### *How is St. Francis de Sales a model for living out the Spiritual Work of Mercy – To Counsel the Doubtful?*

During the time of the Reformation Francis worked for conversion, or "re-conversion", of a heavily Calvinist state in Savoy. He wrote numerous catechetical pamphlets refuting the positions of the Reformers. A gifted writer, he wrote 26 books, including the spiritual classics, "Introduction to the Devout Life" and "Treatise on the Love of God." Francis preached over 4000 sermons and was also an extremely gifted spiritual director and confessor.

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## *Practices to Foster growth in Counseling the Doubtful*

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- **Read a passage of Scripture that give examples of *Counseling the Doubtful*. Re-read the passage and pick a word or phrase that stood out for you.**
  - Matthew 13: 18-23
  - Mark 4: 13-20; 9:14-29
  - Luke 8:11-15
  - John 14:27
- **Pray the pray to Our Lady of Good Counsel.**
  - God of wisdom and love, you have sent your Son Jesus to be the light of the world, and continue to send your Holy Spirit among us to guide us into the way of truth. Open our hearts to your word and let us ponder your actions among us. Give us your Spirit of wisdom and knowledge, of understanding and counsel. With Mary, may we rejoice in your gifts, and walk in the way of truth and love. With all your people on earth and in eternity, we ask this prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, in the unity of your loving Spirit, one holy God, for ever and ever. Amen.
- **Catechetical Texts that speak to *Counseling the Doubtful*:**
  - “Man tends by nature toward the truth. He is obliged to honor and bear witness to it: "It is in accordance with their dignity that all men, because they are persons. . . are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of truth.” (CCC 2467)
  - “The search for truth, of course, is not always so transparent nor does it always produce such results. The natural limitation of reason and the inconstancy of the heart often obscure and distort a person's search. Truth can also drown in a welter of other concerns. People can even run from the truth as soon as they glimpse it because they are afraid of its demands. Yet, for all that they may evade it, the truth still influences life. Life in fact can never be grounded upon doubt, uncertainty or deceit; such an existence would be threatened constantly by fear and anxiety. One may define the human being, therefore, as the one who seeks the truth.” *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II (28)
  - “Genuine spiritual accompaniment always begins and flourishes in the context of service to the mission of evangelization. Paul’s relationship with Timothy and Titus provides an example of this accompaniment and formation which takes place in the midst of apostolic activity. Entrusting them with the mission of remaining in each city to “put in order what remains to be done” (*Tit* 1:5; cf. *1 Tim* 1:3-5), Paul also gives them rules for their personal lives and their pastoral activity. This is clearly distinct from every kind of intrusive accompaniment or isolated self-realization. Missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 173).
- **Name some people from the Bible or saints who lived out the Spiritual Work of Mercy, *To Counsel the Doubtful*.**
  - Examples: (St. Paul, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Therese of Lisieux, etc.)