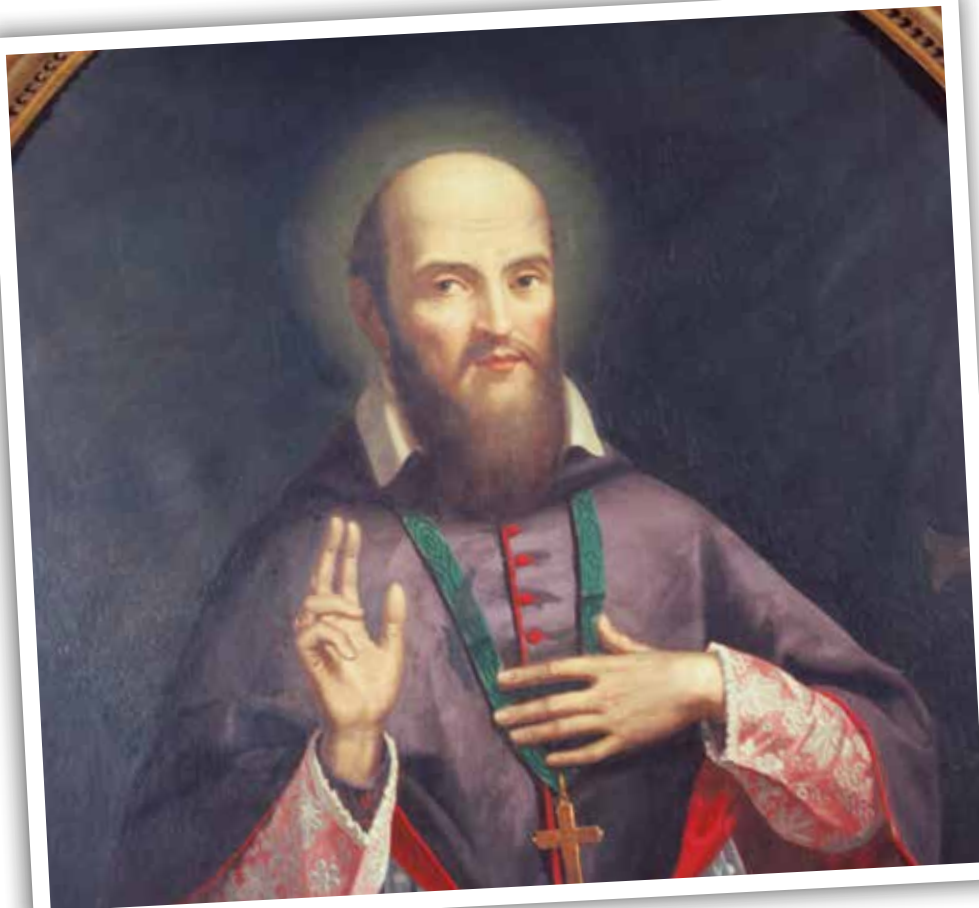


ANDRÉ RAVIER



SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES



André RAVIER s.j.

SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES

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AFTERWORD

PRESENTATION

On the occasion of the fourth centenary of the death of Saint Francis de Sales (1622–2022), the Salesian Family of Don Bosco wanted to honour its holy patron by republishing this beautiful volume entitled simply: “*Saint Francis de Sales*”. The idea for the publication and its realisation came from Professor Aldo Giraud, of the Institute of Spirituality at the Salesian University, to whom we are truly grateful. During this year we also remember the four hundred and fifty years since the birth of Saint Jane Frances de Chantal (1572–2022), co-founder with the Bishop of Geneva of the Visitation Order.

Author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life and the Treatise on the Love of God*, an apostle of holiness for everyone, Francis de Sales was proclaimed a Saint in 1665, declared a Doctor of the Church in 1877, patron of journalists in 1923 and recognised as the “doctor of divine love and evangelical gentleness” in 1967. Today, he still continues to inspire a great number of Christians throughout the world, especially the members of the institutes, associations and congregations that make reference to his spirit.

Many points of convergence have been highlighted between the pastoral care and spirituality promoted by the Second Vatican Council and the teachings of this saint, especially on the method of dialogue, the primacy of love and the universal call to holiness. This volume appeared in French in 1962 and was published in Italian by Elledici Publishers in 1967, the fourth centenary of the saint’s birth.

André Ravier (1905–1999), a Jesuit, philosopher, historian of spirituality, rector of a college and provincial in Lyons, is the author of many publications on Christian spirituality. In particular, he has

written many biographies of the saints, amongst which Ignatius of Loyola, Pierre Favre, Claude de la Colombière, the Curé of Ars, Saint Bruno and Bernardette of Lourdes. He is a recognised specialist of Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane Francis de Chantal.

This book consists of nine chapters in chronological order that present the life and works of St Francis de Sales: his “happy childhood” in Savoy (1); the “perfect gentleman’s” studies in Paris and Padua (2); Provost of the Canons of Geneva (3); the “Apostle of the Chablais”’s time for sowing and for reaping (4-5); the bishop and prince of Geneva (6); the bishop among his people (7); the reform of the clergy and religious (8); the final years of his journey “towards pure love” (9).

In order to put this work together, the author explored original documents, studied the main handwritten texts and the authors who preceded him. His erudition did not prevent him from offering us a simple and transparent account in which the traces of the mystery of God in the life of a great saint are highlighted.

The current edition exactly reproduces the original text. Only the photos have been adapted. It is our hope that the reader can appreciate the quality of the text, which has never aged.

As a preamble, Father André Ravier wanted to quote the testimony of St Vincent de Paul, disciple and friend of the Bishop of Geneva, who stated that “Bishop de Sales ardently wished to be a portrait of the Son of God”, to the point of becoming “The man who best reproduced the Son of God living on earth.”

Let us make our own the apostolic project of the doctor of love, who inspired Saint John Bosco and also Father André Ravier, who concludes his presentation as follows: “Francis de Sales is someone who wanted – like Jesus Christ on earth – to love God with all his human heart: and, having experienced the demands and the sweetness of this gift, he worked to introduce as many souls as possible into what he magnificently calls the ‘gift of love’”.

Morand Wirth, sdb.

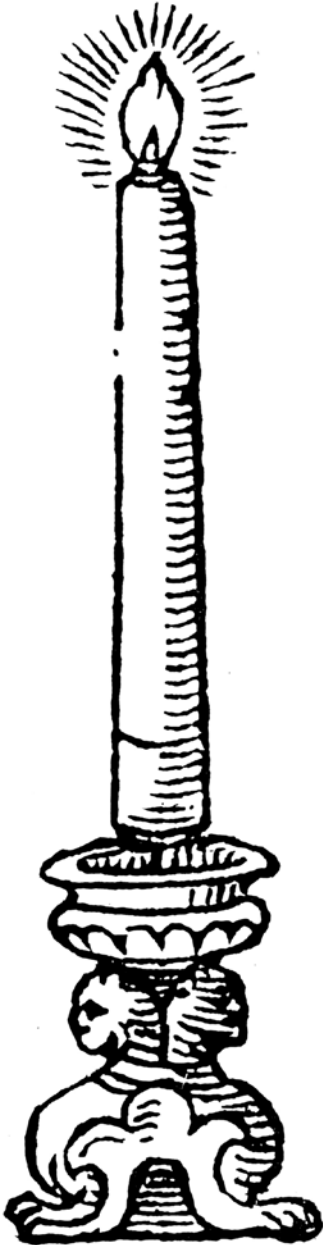
Author's note

Our text is, in the first instance, based on documents published in the *Œuvres de Saint François de Sales* (Visitation d'Annecy, 1892–1932, 26 vols.); just the same, we have made use of letters discovered in the 19th century with a degree of prudence. To avoid making this book too heavy we are not providing a list of references when it is a case of quoted material drawn from this huge edition of the *Œuvres complètes*. The reader who is familiar with the writings of St Francis de Sales will easily be able to find this material with the assistance of the excellent indexes in those volumes.

We will do similarly for quotations taken from the two *Canonisation processes* (1627–1632; 1655–1658) or from the *Année Sainte des Religieuses de la Visitation Sainte-Marie*.

Very rarely have we made use of an expression or fact drawn from biographies by M. de Longuetterre (*Vie de très-illustre messire François de Sales...*, Lyon, 1624), Jean de Saint-François (*La Vie du bienheureux messire François de Sales...*, Paris, 1624), or by Fr Louis de la Rivière (*La Vie de l'illustrissime François de Sales...*, Lyon, 1624). And only with due reserve have we used the *Histoire du Bienheureux François de Sales evesque et prince de Geneve* (Lyon, 1634), written by his nephew Charles-Auguste de Sales. We have used this latter as little as possible and only with regard to facts that have been confirmed elsewhere. Any references that follow, therefore, concern only works that do not belong to this collection common to all the biographies of St Francis.

***“The man who best reproduced the Son of God
living on earth”***



Only a saint could speak about another saint this way. The words were St Vincent de Paul's. At the Paris process, he bore witness to the outstanding virtues of Francis de Sales: 'Bishop de Sales ardently wished to be a portrait of the Son of God. I was aware that he had so conformed to this model that I often wondered, to my amazement, how a simple creature could – given human frailty – reach such a high degree of perfection and reach the summit of such sublime elevation... His fervour was evident both in his public addresses and in his familiar conversations... When I repeated his words to myself, I felt such an admiration for him that I was led to see in him the man who best reproduced the Son of God living on earth.' (*Procès de Paris*, art. 26 and 27). As daring as this comparison is, it is nonetheless true; even more so I would say; it introduces us to the intimacy of the surprising movement of love that characterises the spiritual destiny of Saint Francis de Sales; it makes explicit and explains

this intimate movement and lets us understand the secret of his prestigious life.

It is in this light that we will sketch the spiritual portrait of Saint Francis de Sales: Francis de Sales is someone who sought – as did Jesus Christ on earth – to love God with all his human heart; and, having experienced the demands and the gentleness of this gift, worked to introduce the greatest possible number of souls to what he magnificently called ‘the eternal freedom of love.’

1 - HAPPY CHILDHOOD

François, the Lord of Boisy and his Lady Françoise

It is undeniable that, right from birth, Francis de Sales seems to have been very much blessed. His lineage – the de Sales on his father’s side, as also the de Sionnaz on his mother’s side – despite not belonging to the earliest families of the Duchy of Savoy, was nevertheless one of ancient and genuine nobility. The de Sales Coat of Arms, ‘azure with two Fesses [bars] of Or [gold] surmounted by Gules [red]; above, a rising crescent in Or [gold], and two Mulletts [stars], one in the middle and the other below’, bore the motto: *Ny plus, ny moins*; and, we are told, the House de Sales numbered some eight generations or 32 ‘quarters of nobility’.

But the true nobility of Monsieur and Madame de Boisy¹ (Boisy being the title Francis’ parents bore, from the name of a wealthy property that Bonaventure de Chevron had given as dowry to his daughter, Françoise de Sionnaz) lay in their fidelity to the Catholic Faith.

In that area close to the territory of Geneva, torn apart since 1534 by the Protestant crisis – a devastation cruelly manifested by the presence in ‘Nessy’ (Annecy) of the Bishop of Geneva, whose episcopal city had become Calvin’s and the Calvinists’ Rome – the

1 Translator’s note: having established that Francis’ parents were of the French aristocracy and technically Lord and Lady de Boisy (‘Seigneur’ and ‘Dame’), we will simplify further reference to them in this work by referring to them as Monsieur (M.) and Madame (Mme) de Boisy, in accordance with the original French text of this book.

de Sales had remained fiercely attached to the Holy See and the Church; they carefully protected themselves and protected their own from any contact with heresy. And being thus immersed from earliest childhood in that atmosphere of religious resoluteness, it was an early grace for Francis that he was not affected by trials and suffering.

Such courageous faith was, for Monsieur de Boisy, something quite different from fidelity to a tradition: it permeated his life and actions. François de Boisy openly practised his religion: he attended religious ceremonies at the de Sales parish church on Sundays and feast days and ‘went to confession and communion at Easter time, on the great yearly feasts and when indulgences were granted’. On his own lands he showed that he ‘loved the poor very much and



Thorens, chapel built over the place where the bedroom was in which St Francis de Sales was born.

especially the peasant farmers whom he helped with all their needs, be it money or wheat, interest free? There was no shadow of heresy in this perfect Christian.

This piety and love for the poor was even more pronounced, and rightly so, in his wife – more than thirty or so years younger than him! A farmer from Thorens, François Terrier, would say at the Process: ‘I saw Madame go from the Castle de Sales to church, quite some distance away, in rain and during winter, without fear of cold or snow, to serve God and serve the poor and the sick, sparing nothing to help the latter to whom she gave bread and wine and other necessities. And I saw Madame treating the ulcers on the sick with her own hands...’

Now, this ‘pearl of virtue’, as a councillor from the Duchy of Genevois, François de la Pesse, called her, was barely sixteen years of age when, on 21 August 1567, she brought her first-born child Francis into the world: as ‘balanced’ and as ‘reasonable’ as this young mother might have been, it was impossible for her not to be passionately attached to that ‘tender’ and ‘delicate’ child to whom she was closer in age than she was to her husband.

We are not lacking in information on Francis de Sales’ earliest years. Wet nurse Pétremande Puthod, to whom was entrusted the premature baby who, to her great regret, Mme. de Boisy could not feed, was still alive at the time of the first canonisation Process. Being called upon to refer to her own memories of an infant who became Bishop and Prince of Geneva, and even more so a candidate for the honours of the Church, is no everyday occurrence: so one can forgive the good Pétremande for a degree of lyricism; she tells us that Francis was ‘a very graceful baby, handsome, friendly, gentle and familiar... I have never seen a child easier to feed and who had a better nature’.

To a child ‘of such good nature’, Monsieur de Boisy gave a strict, even austere upbringing, as befitted the first-born of a noble family: we are assured that he was not spared the whip on occasion of

some small misdemeanour but, in compensation, ‘the reasons for everything that was demanded of him’ were explained. The father’s severity, the mother’s tenderness: this upbringing, which was always balanced, soon bore good results. ‘Right from childhood,’ Mother de Chantal testified ‘as I have heard various people worthy of trust say, he was very quiet and obedient to his parents, and he had a sensibility, gentleness and goodness that was quite extraordinary for that age.’

Charles-Auguste de Sales notes, describing this childhood, a trait that seems plausible to us: his parents ‘often instilled the love and fear of God in Francis and explained the mysteries of the Christian faith to him as clearly as they could through similes and comparisons drawn from nature; they always responded to his little questions.’ This religious pedagogy would strongly mark the spirit and soul of Francis.

Undoubtedly, the castle de Sales was but a ‘fortified manor house’ from around which lands, pastures and a large orchard sloped away; but the landscape in this region is wondrous. Situated at the entrance to the val d’Usillon, the castle was on the border of two regions of very different aspect: to the west, low, fertile, smiling hills; to the east, high mountains, scattered forests and, behind, a steep cliff that rises like a mountain and whose peak retains its snow even in summer. This panorama, with its seasonal changes, filled young Francis’ mind with stupendous images: natural items became more familiar to him every day; he understood them, felt them with all his keen sensitivity. They were part of his inner universe and, also, already a part of his religious universe.

But all these favourable circumstances lavished upon him by his family destiny would not have had such a positive effect on the balance and religious drive of Francis had not God been at work in his soul. We can believe a mother’s eyes and heart: ‘Were I not the mother of a child like this,’ Madame de Boisy had to confide to Madame de Chantal towards 1610 ‘I would reveal many of the

marvels of his childhood... I often observed that from when he was very small, he was predisposed to the blessings of heaven and only breathed the love of God...' And, we could add, 'and love for the poor', learned at the school of his admirable mother. We will see the mystery of grace that was already enclosed in the secret of that little child's heart

Student at La Roche and Annecy

An important change took place in Francis' life – it was 1573 and he was six years old. Louis de Sales, Monsieur de Boisy's brother, had decided to send his three sons to school at La Roche, a large



Cross on the site of the ancient de Sales Manor House
(destroyed in 1630).

town situated just three leagues from the castle. M. de Boisy seized upon the occasion to carry out a plan he had been thinking of for some time: Francis would accompany his cousins to college. At La Roche, from the outset Francis proved to be the perfect student to be a role model for his classmates. Even more than his gentleness it was his piety that aroused wonder and charmed people. So much so that according to Mother de Chaugy, two years later when Francis left La Roche never to return there, 'most (people) went with him, and wept, saying that it was the blessing of their city that was being taken away from them.' This was in 1575.

It is said that it was the political situation that caused this abrupt change. Louis de Sales had thought it prudent for Monsieur de Boisy, his family and domestics, not to live in the castle at Sales and they withdrew to the castle at Brens. This change of residence meant a change of college for the students. It is possible; but an even simpler reason could be taken into consideration: the eldest of Louis' sons had completed the cycle of studies at the small college in La Roche, and to continue his education it was necessary for him to go to a more important institute: his brothers and cousin followed him. Whatever the case, our four students were now at college in Annecy: this college, founded in 1551 by Canon Eustache Chapuys, was flourishing at the time and among its students it numbered all the outstanding youth of Savoy.

Two important events took place here for the spiritual growth of Francis de Sales: first of all, his First Communion and Confirmation, which he received from Bishop Angelo Giustiniani on 17 December 1577, at Saint-Dominique in Annecy. Francis was ten years old, but this young man made an impression on his companions, and also on his teachers. A diligent student where study was concerned, and talented, he was also a lovable companion: they all admired, loved and respected him. 'Just his presence' Mother de Chantal tells us, 'drew respect from the other students, his classmates: right from then he had the gravitas and humble and judicious demeanour that

he had throughout his life... he endured the impertinent humour of the other students with patience and kindness... and towards evening, when his classmates went off to amuse themselves, he remained at home and invited the lady he was boarding with to listen to a reading from the *Life of the Saints*, saying to her: "Aunt, I have something good to tell you."

The second important event of this period was the tonsure that Francis received on 20 September 1578. Even then he was planning to become a priest. There are two personal exchanges that make us certain of this: to Mother Angélique Arnauld, Abbess of Port-Royal des Champs, Francis said one day: 'From the time I was twelve years old, I had resolved so strongly to be a man of the Church that I would not have exchanged this resolution even for a kingdom.' And to one of his penitents he said: 'Since I had the grace of knowing a little about the result of the cross, this feeling entered my soul and never left it.'

Taking these two personal insights together allows us to glimpse the quality of this decision by Francis: it is a firm, decisive will, one which immediately goes to the essence of the Gospel and the mystery of redemption.

In order to affirm his resolution as best he could, without however openly opposing the prestigious plans for the future that his scholastic successes gave rise to in Lord de Boisy's mind, Francis asked his father for permission to receive the clerical tonsure. Being a cleric then did not mean being destined for Holy Orders, but it did open the way to stipends and benefits. But this was not how Francis saw it. The boy presented himself for the tonsure as a future man of the Church: 'Knowing that Gallois Regard, the Bishop of Bagnerois, was to impart Orders at Clermont-en-Genevois, he went there immediately, furnished with dimissorial letters... There, in the church of Saint-Etienne, he received the tonsure according to the sacred rites and received the Lord, with indescribable joy, in the year 1578.'



Thorens, Francis de Sales' baptismal font in the parish church.

‘With indescribable joy’: we gladly believe Charles-Auguste de Sales. In fact, this twelve-year-old child was truly surprising. However, we must not be deceived, and the rest of this portrait will soon prove to us that this amicability hid an iron-like strength, and this charm hid an intense struggle. Certainly, God helped him and facilitated his effort; but to these interior inclinations Francis responded with ‘resolve’. He had chosen God and this choice was unreserved and one he would not repent of.

This was clearly seen that autumn of 1578, when Monsieur de Boisy, very proud of Francis’ scholastic successes, decided to send him to extend his studies in Paris. Always anxious to set up brilliant relationships for his son, M. de Boisy had decided that Francis should attend lessons at the Navarre college, attended by the Parisian youth elite. But Francis was not of the same opinion: ‘He had heard that the young people there were not so devoted to piety as the ones who attended the Jesuit Fathers college, whose fame and esteem he had heard so much of. It was all that was needed because, in his heart, Francis preferred the Clermont college to the one at Navarre. But how to convince M. de Boisy to give up his project? Francis, already a diplomat at the time, resorted to his mother’s mediation. So that when our twelve-year-old student arrived in Paris “under the guidance and governance of M. Jean Déage,² he enrolled in the college at Clermont.

2 Déage was in fact a young student priest, but the author refers to him as M. Déage.



2 – THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN

Paris and the spiritual crisis of 1586–1587

Lyon-Bourges-Orléans. Following this route, by the end of September,¹ he had reached the ‘royal city of Paris, mother of the learned Muses, liberal arts and every science’, as it is called by Fr Louis de la Rivière: but also the city of politics, religious disputes and joyous crazy student antics...

Francis was enrolled in the Humanities course at the college at Clermont, and perhaps also in the Superior Grammar or Rhetoric course, since he had to start out in Greek, which he did not know. For four years ‘he recommenced the study of human letters’. Then, having obtained his Bachelor’s Degree, he was admitted – in 1584 – to the philosophy course that lasted four years. Through the young philosopher’s handwritten notebooks that have come down to us, it is easy to see how earnestly he dedicated himself to study, and especially his mental qualities: order, method, depth; we should not marvel that he was thought to be ‘one of the firsts at the University’ and at the end of four years was judged to be ‘perfect in philosophy’.

During these eight years he spent in Paris, Francis’ spiritual life saw some important developments. Charles-Auguste de Sales perhaps takes some liberty with the calendar when he tells us of Francis’ arrival in Paris: ‘He had barely sheathed his sword when he

1 Generally, Francis’ departure for Paris is dated as 1582, More precise studies tend to bring this date forward to 1578: Francis was twelve years old. Cf. the critical biography by Étienne-Marie LAJEUNIE, *Saint François de Sales: l’homme, la pensée, l’action*, Paris, Guy Victor, 1966, 2 vols

immediately asked to be taken to the Jesuit college.’ What is certain is that however much taken up by his studies and his education to be a gentleman (dancing, horsemanship, fencing) all of which Monsieur de Boisy demanded he be energetically initiated in, Francis ‘reminded himself that he had been made a cleric at Clermont and did not wish to change his resolve.’ His first thought was to choose (most probably from among the Fathers at the college) ‘a spiritual father and director to whom he could entrust his conscience and who would teach him the maxims of eternal life: in the same way that he had been given a teacher for human sciences.’

His fervour shone out among his fellow students in Paris, as had been the case at La Roche and Annecy: ‘He made himself so agreeable to everyone by his modesty,’ says Mother de Chantal ‘that it was a pleasure to look at him when the Blessed walked through



The castle at Thorens acquired by the de Sales family.

the streets: even the craftsmen among his classmates looked up to him.' He went to communion often, perhaps already 'every eight days,' or at least every month. During that time 'he gladly stayed with the Capuchins' and had great admiration for the famous Fr Ange de Joyeuse. To all these practices of piety he secretly added various acts of austerity such as fasts and the use of the hair-shirt.

He had a very keen devotion to the Virgin Mary; he especially loved the Black Madonna of Saint-Etienne des Grès, and since he passed by this church a number of times each day, he would gladly stop by there for a few minutes. During those years he entered the Congregation. 'Seeing that a number of people in the Congregations of the Blessed Virgin lived angelically and religiously, following the advice of his director he enrolled in one of them and very often carried out roles of Assistant and Prefect.'

In Paris, Francis felt the desire to deepen his knowledge of his religion and to set aside some hours of free time for theology. It was a yearning of his soul, certainly, this need to initiate himself in the Holy Scriptures and the mysteries of his faith. But also, undoubtedly, it was an unadmitted plan of preparation for the as yet distant goal of priesthood. He knew that in spite of the decrees of the Council of Trent and contrary to the keen desire of Bishop de Granier, the unfortunate times did not permit the opening of a regular seminary at Annecy to prepare candidates for Orders. Later he would say: 'In Paris I learned many things that would please my father, and theology to please myself.'

However, one fine day Francis did receive permission from M. Déage to dedicate himself to theological studies so long as philosophy did not suffer from it. Here is how our diplomat managed this, according to Charles-Auguste de Sales: 'Since, during that same time, his tutor, M. Déage, was studying theology... he studied and leafed through his writings at home whenever he had time; and the more he considered the eternal truths in depth the more the desire to continue was kindled in him; so, as soon

as he came across the slightest difficulty in theology, he debated it with his teacher and other theologians so he could overcome it. He also sought to attend debates held at the Sorbonne and wrote down the questions, arguments and decisions that he considered more worthy of note. He often went to listen to lessons by Gilbert Générard, a man of divine more than human knowledge: and thus it was that he conceived that great and profound theological understanding for which he continued to be admired for the rest of his life.’

Générard? Here is a name that makes one prick up one’s ears: this Benedictine from Cluny, a prodigy of learning, had introduced the historical criticism advocated by Maldonnat into the strictly scholastic atmosphere of the Royal College... Moreover, as faithful as he was to the Sorbonne, Francis very often took the opportunity to forage in the garden of the ‘innovators’: ‘He also learned Hebrew and the positive theology of Maldonnat.’ Maldonnat? A Jesuit theologian, whose regents at the Sorbonne had seen to his departure from Paris in 1677, accusing him of ‘novelty’, but his famous lessons continued under another guise... For Francis, the attraction to theology was decidedly something quite other than curiosity or aestheticism: he foresaw the religious dramas he would be facing up to in the near future.

Indeed, he bore them within, experienced them: and thus we come to the crisis – we can call it this without over-dramatising it – through which this barely twenty-year-old young man would pass. When we ask ourselves what date this broke out, historians hesitate between 1586 and 1587. But the seriousness of the event does not change. The ‘storm’ lasted six weeks and was so profound that even Francis’ health was shaken by it.

‘On one occasion the Blessed told me,’ Mother de Chantal said in her deposition ‘in order to comfort me in some problem I had, that when he was a student in Paris he fell into serious temptations and great mental anguish; it seemed to him, in the most absolute way,

that he was damned and that there was no possibility of salvation for him... Despite this most painful travail, deep down he had in mind his resolution to love and serve God with all his strength throughout his life, and with so much more affection and fidelity the more it seemed to him that he could not do it for eternity. This anguish lasted at least three weeks, or around six as far as I can recall, and was so violent that he did not feel at all like eating or sleeping, and became very thin and as yellow as wax, something that concerned his tutor no end. Now, one day when it pleased divine Providence to free him from this, while he was returning from the Palais, he passed by a church and went in to pray. He went before an altar of Our Lady, where he found a prayer glued to a small board: Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known, etc. He said it all; then he got up, and at that moment he felt perfectly and completely healed; and it seemed to him that his sickness had fallen away from him like scales from a leper.'

This testimony of Mother de Chantal's leaves nothing to be desired. But it does pose a question: where did these 'serious temptations and great mental anguish' for Francis come from? Very clearly they are of a spiritual order. Nevertheless, could they not depend partly on a very sensitive temperament, one that was a bit scrupulous, and on a degree of youthful 'melancholy', a melancholy inherited from his mother and that was made worse by hours of tiredness? Now, was Francis getting sufficient rest in 1586-1587? One of his fellow students tells us that 'very often, leaving the philosophy lessons, he would skip the usual meals so he could go to the Sorbonne to listen to the theological debates.'

It is significant that Francis shared his personal feelings about this trial precisely with 'a gentleman who had fallen into deep melancholy': 'It is said that other than the illness you have due to physical ailments, you are also afflicted by violent melancholy... But, sir, please tell me what reason you have for nurturing this sad feeling this is so harmful to you. I fear that your mind is still

troubled with fears of sudden death and God's judgement. Alas, what strange torment!... My soul, having put up with this for six weeks, is able to empathise with those who are afflicted with it... Perhaps you do not hope in God? Whoever hopes in him can never be confounded. No, sir: he will never be.'

Whatever its harbingers may have been, the crisis we are analysing came to Francis with such violence, and took on such a nature that we cannot but recognise 'the Lord's hand' in it. The trial has features of the highest mysticism about it. It is a surprising coincidence, more or less in the same era – precisely in 1583 – that John of the Cross described the extraordinary ways of the spiritual life in amazing terms and especially this stage, ever original in its forms, through which God purifies the soul that wishes to unite itself to him through a closer union, and that John calls the 'Night'. 'And finally, by means of this night and purgation of the old man, all the energies and affections of the soul are wholly renewed into a divine temper and divine delight.'² For Francis de Sales, was it not precisely this that was the benefit he gained from the crisis in 1586–1587?

We do not know the precise intensity of his spiritual fever. However, documents we are sure of inform us of its violence and the way it ended up.

It seems that it all began with a difficulty of a purely speculative kind: the mystery of predestination. Faced with the thinking of St Augustine and St Thomas, who insist on foreknowledge and the free choice of God in the matter of human salvation, Francis began by becoming keenly aware of the uncertainty of salvation. But it is at this point that he is dismayed when meditating on his own behaviour and assessing the dangers threatening him from among the young student population. And being so sensitive and with a heart that 'loves so lovingly', was he, Francis, among the small

2 JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Dark Night of the Soul*, book 2, chapter 4.2.

number of the predestined?... In fact, the crisis was mainly of a psychological and spiritual nature, but for Francis, any problem of the soul was complicated by a problem of intelligence.

At this point we need to pay much attention to the lament of this anguished soul, just as his tutor, M. Déage, and François Favre, Francis' servant, make it known to us through Charles-Auguste de Sales. If these words are genuine – and we have every reason to believe they are, since they correspond to the act of heroic abandonment preserved for us by Fr de Quoex, and to the Protestation in 1591 – they reveal to us in a magnificent way the purity of love that Francis had achieved in his spiritual life. It really is the lament of frustrated love, a love that suddenly – against all his hopes – sees the removal of the certainty of one day possessing its one and only object. But in the fire of his anguish this love is strangely purified; and, in a painful way he falls back on what remains of his happiness: ‘Wretch that I am, alas! Shall I therefore be deprived of the grace of him who so gently made me taste his sweetness and who was so lovable to me? O Love! O Charity! O Beauty to whom I vowed all of my affections! So I will no longer enjoy your delights?... O Virgin...will I therefore never see you in the realm of your Son? And therefore will I never share in this immense benefit of the Redemption? And didn't my sweet Jesus die as much for me as for others? Ah! whatever it may be, Lord, at least I love you in this life, if I cannot love you in that eternal life, since no one praises you in hell...’

It is a tragic and generous prayer, but that is not enough to pacify his soul.

The more Francis studied and discussed, the more he came up again predestination to glory, prior to any prediction of merits. It seemed that there was no solution possible to this spiritual drama, when one day, returning alone from college, ‘more dead than alive’, the idea came to him to enter the church of Saint-Etienne des Grès, as he often did. It was ‘the day that it pleased Divine Providence to free him’, according to Mother de Chantal's account.

Here, historians are divided over various points (the time it took to resolve the crisis, where the heroic act of abandonment took place, the date of the Protestation): our preference is to follow Mother de Chantal's rhythm.

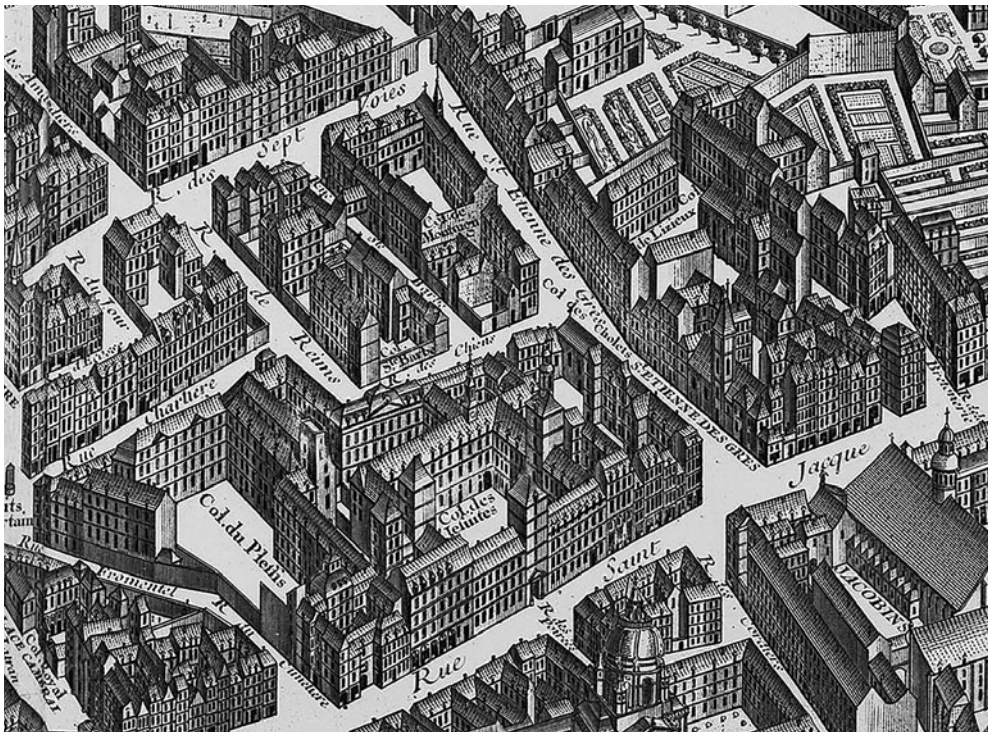
So, once he had entered the church, Francis went 'straight' to the chapel of the Virgin. There is no doubt that at that moment he remade his 'act of heroic abandonment', the offering that has been preserved by Fr de Quoex: 'Whatever happens, Lord, you who hold everything in your hand and whose ways are justice and truth: whatever you have ordained for me regarding the eternal decree of predestination and reprobation: you whose judgements are a deep abyss, you who are ever a just judge and merciful father, I will love you, Lord, at least in this life if it is not granted me to love you in eternal life; I will love you at least here, my God, and I will always hope in your mercy, and will always repeat your praise, despite all that Satan's angel continues to inspire me to the contrary. O Lord Jesus, you will always be my hope and my salvation in the land of the living. If, because my conduct requires it, I must be cursed among the cursed who will not see your most sweet face, at least grant me that I will not be among those who curse your holy name.'

Having reaffirmed this pitiful acquiescence to the divine will, 'he noticed a prayer card attached to the wall: It was the *Memorare* (*Remember, O most gracious Virgin...*). He knelt down and said it, weeping.' And then: 'Having finished the prayer, he asked for health of body and soul and made a vow of virginity to God and the Virgin; as testimony and reminder of this, he made a vow to say the rosary every day of his life. And there, among these prayers and vows the temptation vanished, his health was restored, and it seemed that it was being lifted from his head and body like the scabs or scales of leprosy.'

At the end of this crisis, Francis had gained an inestimable experience of God's ways and – something very important – he had taken a doctrinal position on a major question in Catholic theology.

Usually we insist on the importance of the first of these advantages: it is very certain that Francis, despite being barely twenty years of age, was now able to understand the most painful trials of the soul that God wanted to lead to the purity of his soul. But if we consider the era, the disputes that Francis, as priest and then bishop, would be mixed up in: Protestantism, exceptional mysticism and also, towards the end of his life, the forerunners of Jansenism, all discussions where the destiny of human freedom is at stake in its relationships with grace, one can only admire the wisdom of God who thus prepares a doctor of pure love and authentic 'freedom of the glory of the children of God'.

Despite Francis' crisis having ended, it seems that the problem of predestination remained for some time still, perhaps forever, a



Paris, College at Clermont and the Church of Saint-Etienne des Grès (detail from the 1739 Turgot map).

tender point in his religious thinking. In his manuscripts we find a number of annotations on this topic: one of them that is closer to the crisis of 1586–1587 in its tenor and tone is certainly the surprising ‘protestation,’ that along with the best critics we locate towards 1591. We cannot quote it in its entirety:³ we will refer to passages from it that best express the frankly apostolic and spiritual attitude adopted by Francis to the speculative problem of predestination.

‘Prostrated at the feet of the Blessed Augustine and Thomas,’ (the two authors whose theses had at least amplified, if not caused, his crisis), ‘I am ready to be ignorant of everything in order to know Him who is the knowledge of the Father, Christ crucified.’ In this simple sentence it is already revealed what would be his mystical thinking. ‘Indeed, although I do not doubt that the things I have written are true,’ (this protestation is at the end of the theological notes on predestination) ‘since I see nothing that could constitute a substantial doubt as to their truth, nevertheless, given that I do not see everything and such a profound mystery is too bright to be looked at by my owl eyes,’ (it seems this would be the position Francis would adopt when consulted by Paul V in the dispute *De Auxiliis*) ‘if, later, the contrary might be clear – something I believe will never happen – or, worse still, if I were to know that I were damned – may this not happen, Lord Jesus! – by that will that the Thomists place in God so that He may show His justice, struck with astonishment and raising my eyes to the Supreme Judge, I would gladly say with the Prophet: *Will my soul not be subject to God? Amen, Father, because it seems good to you to be so; your will be done. And I would say this so many times in the bitterness of my heart, until God, changing my life and my sentence, answered me: “Have confidence, my son, I do not want the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live.”*’

³ Cf. *Œuvres*, vol. XXII, pp. 63-68.

(Francis brings together biblical texts, especially Gospel texts, which state God's will to save all human beings).

'Since you wished to glorify my name, even through your suffering, if that be possible, although in this there is little glory and exaltation of my name, which is not "damnator" but "Jesus"' (let us read these beautiful words in Latin: *glorificatio nominis mei qui non est damnator, sed Jesus*) "I will establish you above the multitude, so that you may praise me in the eternal beatitude where the glory of my name shines forth..." Then I will not have to answer differently than before: Amen, Father, because it seems *good* to *you* to be so. My heart is ready, O God, to embrace pain for your sake; *my heart is ready* for glory for your name's sake, Jesus.... Amen, Jesus, Mary.'

This personal statement is of fundamental importance; it represents a peak, perhaps the peak of the spiritual life; we believe Fr Bremond, who is a master in this regard: 'Precious relic, less gripping and enthralling than Pascal's amulet, but of a doctrinal richness of a much superior quality.'⁴ The 'doctrinal richness' of this text does not amaze those who know of the other notes on predestination, especially the fragment from 1591 wherein Francis lists the authoritative proofs and texts that make plausible the thesis that 'not only does damnation occur as a result of expected demerits, but also predestination is based on merits'.

From now on, this would be the theological position on which he would base all his theological discussion with the Protestants, all his preaching and spiritual direction. In 1618, more than thirty years after his crisis, writing to Fr Lessius, he said: 'In the library at the Jesuit College in Lyons, I saw your *Treatise on Predestination*, and although I only had time to browse through it in haste, I have noticed that you embrace and support the opinion of predestination to glory after predestination of merit, such a noble opinion in so

⁴ Henri BREMOND, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris, Bloud et Gay, 1916, Vol. I, p. 90.

many respects, since it is so ancient, so consoling... It was a great joy for me; for I have always thought that this doctrine was the truest, the most lovable and the most in conformity with God's mercy and grace, as I indicated in my *Treatise on the Love of God*.'

The consequences of the 1586–1587 crisis for the spiritual destiny of Francis de Sales are considerable: they concern not only his thinking but his soul – not just his theology but his personal religion and apostolate. After all, for him this was a real battle for liberation: it strengthened his faith in the most essential truths of the life of grace, developed in him the virtues that are most effective in the relationship of the human being with God, and gave him a very profound experience of Christian life, making him aware of extreme anguish and abrupt freedom. In short, it gave him access to the just, healthy and authentic 'freedom of glory of the children of God': from then on it would be the goal towards which he would fervently strive and towards which he would endeavour to direct the most sublime and humble souls who would lean on him in their search for God.

Francis' first stay in Paris was coming to an end: he completed his course at the Faculty of Arts. At the beginning of summer 1588 he headed back to Savoy.

Monsieur de Boisy had earmarked 'this lad of great hopes' for the 'long red robes' of a senator.

Nevertheless, he granted Francis, who had not been back to Savoy for eight years, 'some free time to see his relatives and friends'; but he had already arranged that, in the autumn of 1588, the student would go to Padua, once more accompanied by M. Déage, and there he would apply himself to the study of law: Gallois, his younger brother, would go with him and follow the grammar course at the Jesuit College.

Padua and the doctorate ‘in both kinds of law’

And so we find Francis grappling with studies of ‘both kinds of law’, meaning canon and civil law, in obedience to his father; but secretly, and with the connivance of M. Déage, he would dedicate a part of his time to completely re-doing his theological studies: ‘He set aside eight hours of study, four for jurisprudence and the same for theology’. In fact, as an extra and as a pastime, he took up botany and medicine as well!

But the religious problem remained at the centre of his concerns: ‘To gain greater profit not only in scholastic matters but also in mysticism, having laid good foundations for this in Paris, it was necessary for him to have a good master and director.’ For this role he chose, due to an ‘inspiration from heaven’, Fr Antonio Possevino, from the Society of Jesus, a man whose virtues had raised him head and shoulders above others’. Fr Antonio visibly exerted great influence on the spiritual direction of his disciple. It was certainly he who urged him to join the Congregation of the Annunciation of our Blessed Lady with its headquarters at the Jesuit College, and to follow the *Spiritual Exercises*; In 1590, when he thought he was dying, Francis had him called. But, during the three years in Padua, Fr Possevino was especially, for Francis, the teacher who would continue Génébrard’s teaching, and develop in him a taste for Holy Scripture; as well as being the guide who helped him to lead a sincerely Christian life among the carefree and quarrelsome student population in Padua.

Going back to this time⁵ is a document of major importance: in agreement with his director, Francis took up a rule of life. Should we see ‘an *Introduction to the Devout Life* in miniature’ in these

5 Contrary to what has often been said, I do not believe we can draw from this text the proof that it would have been written only after Francis’ major illness at the end of 1590 – beginning of 1591

pages? Not necessarily. We should not forget that Francis is secretly moving in the direction of the priesthood, and that in the church of Saint-Etienne des Grès he made a vow of chastity that he intended to faithfully observe, with God's help, in the midst of the dangers of life in Padua. This does not detract from the fact that this document may give us some valuable information on the notion that Francis had of Christian life around 1590.

There is one exercise that was very close to his heart: 'I will always prefer the exercise of *preparation* to anything else and I will do it at least once a day, that is, in the morning: it consists of a preliminary examination, made in the presence of God, of what is expected to happen during the day.'

After which he proposes seven articles for spending the day well. 'In the morning, as soon as I wake, I will give thanks to God... Then



Padua, ancient courtyard at the University.

I will think about one of the sacred mysteries... I will not fail to hear Mass each day, etc.’

Now, among these seven articles, the third is too original for us not to spend a moment to think about it, especially since the third part of our document will take it up again and develop it: ‘Just as the body needs sleep to rest and soothe its tired limbs, so does the soul need to have some time in which to sleep and rest in the chaste arms of its heavenly Spouse, so as to restore the strength and vigour of its spiritual potential; so, therefore, I will spend some time each day in this holy repose, so that my soul, imitating the beloved disciple, can sleep securely on the beloved breast, or dare I say the loving heart of the loving Saviour.’

The detailed description – in eight points – of this holy ‘repose’ is truly a document of note. A singularly active repose in which all the great themes of Christian meditation come together... But what is important is the attitude of the soul. This is an extremely characteristic attitude: it really is about rest, something enjoyable, a pleasurable delight that gives the soul rest and introduces it to the love of God.

‘First of all’ the text begins, ‘having chosen a convenient time for this holy repose, before anything else I will try to remember all the good impulses, desires, affections, resolutions, projects, feelings and pleasant things that the divine Majesty has sometimes inspired in me and had me experience while pondering his holy Mysteries, the beauty of virtue, the nobility of serving him and the many benefits that he has granted me with such generosity...’

This tone of admiration and enthusiasm is sustained to the end: ‘Second, I will rest beautifully, etc... Third, I will rest peacefully, etc... Fourth, I will sleep softly in the knowledge of the excellence of virtue, etc... Fifth, I will linger in admiration before the beauty of reason, etc... Sixth, I will carefully ponder the strictness of divine Justice... Seventh... I will be concerned with seeing how these beautiful attributes (God’s infinite wisdom, omnipotence,

incomprehensible goodness) shine out in the sacred mysteries of the life, death and passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, etc.’

The eighth is worth quoting: ‘... I will fall asleep in the love of the one and only goodness of my God; if I can I will savour it, not for its effects but in itself; I will drink this water of life, not in creaturely containers or bottles but from its source; I shall taste how good this adorable majesty is in itself, good in itself, good for itself; and also how it is goodness itself, all goodness; goodness that is eternal, inexhaustible and incomprehensible. O Lord, I will say, you alone are good by essence and by nature: you alone are necessarily good; all creatures that are good, whether by natural or supernatural goodness, are so only because they share in your loving goodness.’ This document also contains other rules ‘for behaving well in groups and meetings, without stumbling and succumbing to vice.’

Francis de Sales already has this strong, gentle, dogmatically solid spirituality so sensitive to the movements of the heart, which would be his charm and would attract many souls to him. But would he have achieved this peak, would he have written these pages on spiritual Sleep had he not passed through the crisis of 1586–1587 and emerged from it triumphantly? A soul that had not mastered its spiritual anguish in faith and trust could not immerse itself so freely in the sources of love...

For Francis, somewhere between the dryness of legal studies and the dangers of the university scene, this rule was a talisman: ‘So he could often re-read (these rules and laws) he wrote them down on the first and final pages of a prayer book he usually carried in his pocket.’

All the more so since, having resumed his theological studies, he necessarily found himself faced with the problem of predestination. Fr Possevino, whom Francis had brought up-to-date with his future plans, had encouraged him very much in his vocation: ‘Believe me, your mind is not made for the concerns of the Bar, and your eyes were not made for its dust.’ The discovery of the book

by Lorenzo Scupoli, *The Spiritual Combat*, suggested to him by the Theatine Fathers whose services Francis frequented, had once again confirmed his resolution to give himself to God and thus to study theology.

His master in thinking continued to be Saint Thomas Aquinas; in a picturesque perspective on it, Charles-Auguste de Sales imagines Francis 'opening the Angelic Doctor's *Summa* on the lectern in his study, so he could keep it before him and return to it quickly to understand other books'. And there were 'other books': Francis had broadened the field of his reading: the Fathers were familiar to him and among them all he had a predilection for Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom, Cyprian whose style enchanted him, and to these he added St Bernard and St Bonaventure.

However, on the precise point of predestination he distanced himself resolutely from what was presented to him as the thinking of St Thomas, and held to the 'truer and more pleasing' opinion⁶ that his Jesuit teachers openly taught, basing themselves on Father Molina's book, published in 1588: *De liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, praedestinatione et reprobatione concordia*.

Harking back to these years spent in Padua (and probably in 1591) is the note we have already cited, one that neatly described the very pure attitude of faith and trust that would be Francis' from then on.

But it is noteworthy that the four 'fragments' that have come down to us of his *Theological Observations* at Padua, all allude to the problem of grace and predestination. One of them is especially moving: 'I noted this with fear and trembling,' Francis writes on 15 December 1590 'so as not to have to regret the loss, if later on this way of thinking in which I confirmed myself when I reached adolescence and when, with age and understanding, I acquired greater experience, would continue to seem true according to

6 Letter to Fr Léonard Lessius (Leys), *Œuvres*, vol. XVIII, pp. 271-274.

the judgement and decision of the Church, as it seemed true to me in my childhood. In fact, ever since then, while my thinking strengthened, I have been meditating on everything that seems to be closely related to the question.⁷

These theological notes, moreover, are suffused with prayer. Here, an invocation to the Holy Spirit, there, a tribute to Jesus Christ. God's desire and zeal for souls are freely expressed: 'I noted all these things for the honour of God and the consolation of souls.' But what mattered to Francis more than anything else was that his doctrine conform perfectly to the teaching of the Church. 'I have written all these things very humbly,' he protests 'being very ready to abandon not only the conclusions I have arrived at or will arrive at, but also the head that thought them up: and, even though my intolerance finds it repugnant to do so, I do this to embrace the opinion that is or will in the future be adopted by the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church, my Mother and the pillar of truth.'

Francis was 'in his twenty-fourth year, and the time he had to give to the study of law had passed when his father ordered him to gain his doctorate.' The great jurist, Guido Panciroli, 'a man filled with virtue and knowledge whose nature was more akin to an angelic than a human one', was very much attached to Francis and himself wanted to be his 'Dissertation director'. The oral exam took place on 5 September 1591. Francis was outstanding in his discussion of the thesis and responded 'very solidly to arguments opposed to the doctrine' ... 'Panciroli, his Dissertation director, was eloquent in his praise,' Charles-Auguste de Sales tells us, 'and gave him the ring, the crown and the privileges of the University'. Francis was promoted Doctor *in utroque iure* – in canon and civil law. Everyone celebrated the fact, 'because he had won over all the hearts in Padua.'

7 Cf. *Œuvres*, vol. XXII, p. 46.

At castle La Thuile, where Monsieur de Boisy had had to withdraw due to war between Catholics and Protestants, Francis' triumph was greeted with great jubilation. Before returning to France, the young Doctor wanted to carry out a vow he had taken long before, and went on pilgrimage to Loreto. Should we, following tradition and Mme. de Chantal herself, place the first trip to Rome during this period? This is certainly a respectable tradition, but a more precise study of documents and dates might lead us to question this and perhaps reject it.⁸

In February 1592, Francis was on his way back to La Thuile, where 'the *Seigneur* de Sales was impatiently awaiting his dear son'.

8 Cf. the critical biography by É.-M. LAJEUNIE, *Saint François de Sales...*, vol. I, p. 181.



3 – PROVOST OF THE CANONS OF GENEVA

Francis ‘A Priest of Jesus Christ’

The welcome was tender and enthusiastic: Francis – still not twenty-five years of age – seemed to everyone to be filled with all the gifts of nature and grace. This young Doctor was also the perfect gentleman, a horseman of fine bearing and had proven on several occasions that, if needed, he could handle a sword with ‘manly courage’: he was worthy of presenting himself to the world as the head of a noble family. His father’s ‘mind was spinning with the great things in store for him’ and to begin with, he bestowed on him the Lordship of Villaroget.

Let us consider him well as he looks over ‘all his demesne’. Has he not perhaps perfectly realised the portrait of the virtuous man whom he outlined in his writing about spiritual repose? ‘Fourth, I will sleep softly in the knowledge of the excellence of virtue: virtue so beautiful, so gracious, so noble, so generous, so attractive, so powerful. It is this that makes man beautiful, both inwardly and outwardly; it makes him incomparably pleasing to his Creator; it suits him extremely well, since it is proper to him. And what consolations, what delights, what upright pleasures it brings him at every moment! Ah! It is Christian virtue that sanctifies him, changes him into an Angel, makes of him a little God and from here on gives him Paradise on earth.’

Francis’ beauty was above all an inner beauty. From the days at Padua ‘one saw a priestly something in him’, says Fr de la Rivière; but his soul was torn: ‘The loving respect he had for his father and

mother held him somewhat in suspense and bewilderment: he did not know if he would irrevocably consent to the immaculate wedding with the Lamb without first gauging what their inclinations were, or if he would delay for a while so he could tackle this trial with all possible discretion.' He had waited, but had not the moment now arrived to declare his decision?

Nevertheless, Francis hesitated to speak: Monsieur de Boisy was almost seventy: how would he suffer this blow that would be so painful for him? Would he not exercise his paternal authority – something that the custom of the time authorised him to do – to reject Francis' plans? In few words, the matter dragged on... Monsieur de Boisy took advantage of this delay: one day he told his son: 'You need to go to Chambéry to be admitted as a lawyer to the Senate there', and Francis agreed to complete the forms that, on 24 November, would lead him to be received at the Bar. Meanwhile, M. de Boisy thought about marrying Francis off to a 'a true aristocrat by blood and by virtue', Françoise Suchet de Miribel, and Francis accepted meeting her, even if it meant doing 'nothing else at Sallanches than simply greeting all the company there, as if he had something else to do'.

But a more subtle danger lay here, because here one could see a unique opportunity for the de Sales family: 'Charles Emmanuel (Duke of Savoy), assured of the probity and doctrine of the Lord of Villarogot, promised him the dignity of Senator in the sovereign Court of Savoy, with letters patent that François Melchior de Saint-Jeoire, Baron d'Hermance, brought from Turin.' Francis thanked His Highness and refused. But all these events convinced him that the moment had come to go beyond this ambiguity. 'He turned to his dear cousin, Louis de Sales, Canon at the cathedral in Geneva' (he was three years older than him and would become his companion in his apostolate) 'and taking him aside he revealed his heart to him completely.' Louis promised Francis he would convince his uncle to consent.

From then on, things moved more quickly. Given that the role of Provost in the Geneva Church was vacant – the provost was the second most important dignitary in the diocese – Louis de Sales, without speaking to Francis about it, worked to have it assigned to his cousin... He confided this plan to Canon François de Ronys, ‘who had much correspondence with Rome and was very practical when it came to managing benefices.’ Canon de Ronys immediately took the usual steps, ‘and God so favoured this matter that in a short time it was certain that His Holiness would grant it’. On 7 March 1593 the bulls of appointment were signed in Rome; on 7 May they arrived at the Archbishop’s residence in Annecy.

Francis was dumbfounded. ‘He believed it was a dream’ but, like his cousin, saw in this event the argument that would make it possible to gain from Monsieur de Boisy the authorisation ‘to be of the Church’ without hurting his paternal pride too much. The conversation between Francis and his father certainly took place on 9 May. Did it take on the dramatic character that tradition has given it? Did Monsieur de Boisy still attempt to gain time? It matters little. In the end he agreed and gave his son his blessing.

The day after, 10 May 1593, Francis wanted to don the soutane. The ceremony took place in the church in the village of Thuile. ‘Truly,’ M. Bouvard, struck by his fervour, said, ‘looking at you it seems you are taking on the Capuchin habit.’ ‘Ah, Sir,’ Francis replied, ‘I am taking on the habit of St Peter.’ On 12 May Francis went down to Annecy and, without any solemn ceremony, was invested in the Office of Provost. In agreement with his bishop, he decided to receive the four Minor Orders and subdiaconate on the Saturday after Pentecost.

Together with his confessor, Fr Aimé Bouvard, he went to the castle at Sales to prepare himself to receive Orders. He arrived there on 18 May and did not leave until 7 June. A time of solitude, reflection, prayer... A moving echo of this retreat has come down to us in the *Année Sainte* of the Visitandines: on 19 May, Francis

asked Fr Bouvard to renew the tonsure he had first received fifteen years earlier from Bishop Regard... and as strange as it may seem, this sacrifice of his hair – ‘they say he had blond and beautiful hair’ – was so much for him that it induced a wave of temptation against his vocation! ‘Alas, Father,’ he confessed to Messer Bouvard, ‘I have endured great struggles against my vocation for two days now; the devil has not left one place in my soul untouched in order to test me, and has tempted me even down to my hair, making me feel huge aversion to this tonsure. Samson’s strength lay in his hair and I think that part of my weakness lay ultimately in mine; because since it has been cut I feel stronger in the service of God and I have promised the Divine Majesty to strip off the old man completely so from now on I can live totally with his grace, in a new life with Jesus Christ.’

The fact that, in this ceremony, Francis refers to the beautiful text of St Paul’s on baptism, clearly indicates his resolve for radical conversion. A written note of his, that Louis de Sales claims to have read on certain tablets that Francis had forgotten to erase, gives us to understand the fervour with which he spent that day: ‘Francis, you must remember that God has granted you great mercies on the nineteenth day of May 1593, through the intercession of the glorious Saint Celestine, protector of your retreat in preparation for orders.’

While he was preparing himself spiritually for Holy Orders, in order to complete the canonical exam that he had already sat for, Francis wrote his first sermon.¹ The topic was chosen in accordance with the Liturgy; the Church was then celebrating the Feast of Pentecost. Francis saw in this an invitation to preaching: ‘This day is the beginning of all preaching’: now, it is noteworthy that one passage of this sermon alludes to the action, in the soul, of free will and grace!

1 We say ‘wrote’ and not ‘gave’; but without taking a stance in the discussion by historians: *Œuvres*, vol. VII, p. 1, note.

On 7 June 1593, Francis returned to Annecy. On the 8th he legally renounced his right as firstborn and his title to Villaroget in favour of his brother Gallois. On the 9th he received the four Minor Orders from Bishop de Granier and on the 11th was promoted to 'the Holy Order of the subdiaconate. After which,' Charles-Auguste de Sales adds, 'his prelate ordered him to be ready for the sermon on the Feast of Corpus Domini.' In fact he gave the sermon only on the day of the octave.

It is a great pity that the text, or at least the thread of this sermon on 'the reality of the body of Our Lord in the most holy Eucharist' has not come down to us, because judging from the summary given us by Charles-Auguste de Sales, it would seem that the young preacher had, for the first time, spelt out his ideas on the Love of God: 'That the sovereign good is communicated in sovereign manner of itself, that there are three principal communications, the first with which the Father communicates to the Son, and with which the Father and Son communicate to the Holy Spirit; the second with which the Blessed Trinity communicated the divine person to human nature. The third, with which God communicates the body of his Son not to nature but to every human person. These three communications are so intimately bound up with each other that the third cannot exist without the second, nor the second without the third.' Which means he was going straight to the heart of Christian mysticism.

Although still a subdeacon, the young provost showed that he was particularly active. Between 24 June and Christmas 1593, he delivered at least five important sermons. Everywhere 'he shone like a beautiful sun': he studied, worked, was regular with the choir and passionate about the liturgy. He visited the sick and reconciled enemies. For the sanctification of souls he founded the Confraternity of Penitents of the Holy Cross...

Francis had not even been 'of the Church' for six months! What apostolic intent, what zeal for souls there was in this cleric! What fire! What would happen, then, when he received the priesthood,

and when he would be bishop? From that moment he had taken the weight of souls upon his shoulders. Grace in him was not in vain: it seems that after his first sermon, Bishop de Granier had exclaimed: 'We have a new Apostle.' It was a true prediction! The life of the Apostles would always be the ideal Francis would try to come as close to as possible.

On the Saturday of the Ember Days in September, on the 18th, Francis received the diaconate. His priestly ordination was established for 18 December, the Saturday after the Third Sunday of Advent. Thanks to a letter that the ordinand wrote to a friend, Antoine Favre, around 15 December, we are able to know something of the feelings that occupied his mind at the time: 'As the tremendous day approaches, the fearful day, as St Chrysostom calls it, when according to the will of our bishop, that is, according to the will of God (since I seek no other interpreters of the divine will); at the approach of the day when, having passed through all the degrees of Holy Orders, I will be promoted to the august dignity of the priesthood, I cannot fail to announce to you the distinct honour and excellent good that await me. It would not be right that this transformation take place, in a man who is all yours, without your knowledge.'

Not without trepidation did Francis confront this 'change', 'the most glorious that could happen (to him) in this world': 'I am assailed by the greatest apprehension that I have ever felt... If I am not deceived, nothing more difficult and more dangerous could happen to man than to be called to hold in his hands and to produce with his word, according to the expression of St Jerome, the One whom Angels – those intelligences that we are unable to conceive of or praise worthily – cannot even embrace in thought or celebrate with just praise.'

Francis was counting on his friend's faith for his turmoil to be understood and so that he would sympathise with his state of mind. 'Certainly, I knew very well, most respected Sir, that to such a holy and

august dignity would be added fearsome responsibilities; but distance can deceive the eyes and there is quite some difference in measuring an object from close up than appreciating it from a distance. You, honourable friend, seem to me to be the only one able to understand the turmoil of my mind since you deal with divine things with so much respect and so much veneration that you can easily judge how dangerous and fearful it is to preside at their celebration, and how easy it is to sin and sin gravely in doing so and how difficult it would be to celebrate them with the dignity they deserve.’

But this friendly lament should not fool Antoine Favre: ‘I am not lacking in courage,’ Francis adds, ‘since until now it has never abandoned me.’ After having thus confided in his dear friend about his ‘apprehension,’ ‘solely to arouse your sympathy; I know that it is a useful remedy to lift up a suffering heart,’ Francis continues in a steady tone: ‘I would not want you to think that the holy mysteries inspire such fear in me that they do not allow any room for hope and joy that are far superior to what I could ever deserve. I am very happy and rejoice – *laetor plurimum et gaudeo* – at being able to fulfil that office, which is among all others the most sublime, to offer a truly acceptable sacrifice...’

Unfortunately this handwritten letter stops here: but, just as it is, this confidence he shares is already, among all others, most precious to us: it so well expresses the infinitely delicate and prudent soul of Francis, whose strength and drive are rooted in the depths of the truths of faith.

On 18 December, Francis de Sales was ‘made priest’: ‘The good prelate,’ Charles-Auguste de Sales tells us, ‘could not prevent himself from weeping when imposing hands and thinking that this was his beloved son. But in that action, the Servant of God Francis, rapt in consideration of his dignity, looked like a man from another world.’ Before celebrating his first Mass, the new priest again wanted to prepare himself with three days of retreat. ‘On 21 December 1593, the day of St Thomas the Apostle, he sang his first Mass in



Annecy, cathedral church

the cathedral church.' 'In that first sacrifice,' he would confide one day to Mother de Chantal 'God took possession of my soul in an inexplicable way.' 'After the Office of Vespers,' adds Charles-Auguste in a statement that is too condensed for our liking, 'he delivered a very fervent sermon on the subject of his sacrifice.' According to the customs of the time, this sermon was certainly a semi-confidence and a kind of agenda-setting declaration, and it is a pity that it has not come down to us.

The five years that followed (1593–1598) show us the priest of Jesus Christ in Francis de Sales. A magnificent figure, before whom the Protestants of the time – at least sincere Protestants – and the most critical historians of today, have had to bow. Grace shone out in this priestly soul. And by providential good fortune we see Francis exercising his priesthood in two apparently opposing situations: in the calm of the peaceful and very Catholic city of Annecy (Christmas 1593 – September 1594), and then in the torment and dangers of the mission of the Chablais.

The first months of priesthood

The Annecy stage of this apostolate began with the solemn 'installation' of the provost. The ceremony took place shortly after Christmas. 'This sacred college made up of so many gentlemen and doctors, after examining his nobility and doctrine in accordance with custom and the statutes, conferred on him the real, actual and corporal possession of the dignity of provost, with a kiss on the high altar and the other habitual ceremonies.'

On this occasion Francis delivered a noteworthy address and programme.² After having expressed his thanks and saying how

² This very noteworthy text is kept in the Public Library in Geneva: it was published only in 1891, edited by the Salesian Academy. Cf. *Œuvres*, vol. VII, p. 99 ff.

confused he was at being thus called, he who was so young and inexperienced, to preside over this ‘venerable chapter of the church of Saint-Pierre of Geneva’, Francis very naturally recalled the sadness of this exile and the desire that the bishop and canons would have it deep in their heart to return one day to the episcopal city. And so the provost proposed to his canons an ‘enterprise’ ‘as great as it is difficult: and yet it is neither impossible nor unworthy of us: it is a matter of recovering Geneva, the ancient seat of your assembly’.

A crusade? The address would have had to have pricked up the ears of more than one of them who was present: armed struggle and fratricide were pretty much an ongoing thing between Protestants and Catholics in that country. But very soon, Francis described the meaning of this reconquest: ‘With charity we need to break down the walls of Geneva; with charity we need to invade the city; with charity we must conquer it again... I do not propose doing battle with iron, nor with that powder whose stench and flavour remind one of the furnaces of hell... We need to repel the enemy with the hunger and thirst that we put up with, not that of our adversaries. We will drive them out with prayer, since you know that these kinds of demons can only be driven out with prayer and fasting. Do you want a simple way to conquer the city?’

Francis drew his example from Scripture: when Holofernes besieged Bethulia he cut off the aqueduct and had all the fountains that quenched the city’s thirst guarded. The same needed to be done to Geneva: ‘There is an aqueduct that nourishes and refreshes, so to speak, every category of heretic, and this can be identified as the bad example of perverse priests, the actions, words and the wickedness of everyone, but especially of the clergy. Through our own fault *God’s name is blasphemed every day among the nations*, and that is why the Lord shed bitter tears for the Prophets. Here is the water of contradiction that seems to me to satiate the burning thirst of heretics... These iniquitous men drink our iniquity, as it is written: *they drink iniquity like water*... Because it is so, O my

comrades in arms, since they watch the actions of others and not their own, please, let us stop the flow of this water.’

The peaceful canons were not a little stunned to hear such warlike epithets bestowed on them. And showing no mercy, the provost continued his harangue: now reminding them of Israel’s exile: ‘Perhaps we would remain insensitive to the pain we would have to feel, faced with a heavier and less honourable exile in insofar as all our sins prolong its duration? The Israelites sat beside the banks of the rivers of Babylon and wept remembering Sion. And what will we do, Canons of Geneva? Are we not perhaps exiled and pilgrims in a strange land, the one we live in and trample on? So let us sit ourselves down by the banks of the rivers of Babylon, of confusion, of sins; let us weep, remembering the Genevan Sion, once so glorious a trophy of Christ’s and that today, because of the crimes of our time and our ancestors, lies oppressed under the most shameful servitude of heresy.’

A final appeal which sums up the provost’s exhortation: ‘In a word, because it is time to end this discourse, we must live according to the Christian rule of life, in such a way that we may be canons, that is, men of the rule, children of God, not just in name but also in fact.’

I invite those who judge Francis de Sales to be too ‘flowery’, to re-read this text in its integrity (there are other no less epic ones): these thoughts, these directives, this tone would soon reveal the true Francis de Sales, the priest of Christ grappling with the sin of the world, convinced he could triumph over it with prayer, penance and especially charity.

The young provost was not content with fine sermons. He acted and gave the example. Despite the pressures from his parents, his friends, he insisted on refusing ‘the state of Senator to which he had been promised by His Serene Highness’. He refused to sit in the famous Senate, but on the other hand attended to the offices of the Chapter: ‘It is a maxim’ he replied one day to Bishop de Granier, ‘to



Portrait of Francis de Sales, dated 1618 (Visitation, Moncalieri).

prefer community actions to individual ones: God is there where we are gathered in his name.' By holding to the letter of his office, the provost could have made do with enforcing canonical discipline; but this was not how Francis conceived of his priesthood: speaking of that period, Mother de Chantal says: 'Everyone knows that he said holy Mass and was present every day at the divine offices, heard confessions and very often preached the word of God in excellent fashion; and from then... they considered him to be a man of God.'

We note this zeal of the new priest for the ministry of confessions: it would be a constant characteristic of his apostolate. 'Having had a special authorisation from his bishop,' (Bishop de Granier had appointed Francis as the *penitentiary* of his diocese), 'he had a confessional built for hearing penitents' confessions in the cathedral church, very close to the door on the Gospel side; he remained there sometimes from dawn till midday, surrounded by a great number of faithful of both sexes, and without any discrimination.'

This sentence should not seem an exaggeration to us: even when he became bishop, Francis would always dedicate himself to this ministry of confessions as one of the most important; he would hear the confessions of 'young and old, poor and rich, nobles and peasants, the healthy and the sick, the strong and the weak': even his mother and father would go to him. He was happy to render this service to other priests in the diocese, and refused any financial recompense for this ministry, as meagre as his income was, given that the Office of Provost had been plundered of all its goods by the heretics in Geneva; on the other hand, he found ways to give alms and 'secretly give to the needy poor'. He loved to comfort, console and reconcile. He was ever more consulted on matters of law or theology.

All this zeal and success did not fail to provoke some jealousy or criticism on occasions: there were also attempts to pit the bishop against his provost. But with his patience and humility, Francis worked out how to deal with his adversaries and responded only

with forgiveness to the wrongdoings they had committed. On the other hand he had many friends who, if necessary, helped him and backed him. Among these, Senator Antoine Favre, whom he calls, in his correspondence, *Frater suavissime, amantissime, dulcissime*, and with whom, in the church at Aix where a fragment of the true Cross is kept, he organised a joint pilgrimage on the Wednesday of Pentecost 1594 of the Confraternity of Penitents of Annecy and the Confraternity of Penitents of Chambéry, recently established by Antoine Favre.



4 – THE APOSTLE OF THE CHABLAIS: TIME FOR SOWING

The Provost's choice

A considerable change then took place in Francis' life. This Provost of the Geneva Canons, who seemed devoted to a hard-working life, certainly but one without risks and that he could easily shine in, would for four years become a poor, threatened, destitute missionary who could be compared to Francis Xavier and even to Saint Paul. He would be the first to launch the assault, if not against Geneva at least against Protestant ministers inspired by Geneva, that he had announced in his inauguration speech: threats, insults, contradictions, failures, abandonment, nothing would be spared him. In Francis de Sales' life there is perhaps no period when he would seem to be greater...

We are talking about what the saint's historians call the *Mission to the Chablais*.

The Chablais is a small area about ten kilometres by five, surrounded in the north by Lake Léman (Lake of Geneva) and in the south by the mountains of Faucigny. In 1594, the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel I, took it back: it was part of the territory under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Geneva, Bishop de Granier. But the religious situation was less than consoling for the bishop: of the twenty-five thousand souls who populated the area, only a hundred or so were Catholic; all the rest, willingly or unwillingly, had gone over to Protestantism.

How come things had come to this? It would take too long to explain in detail the vicissitudes experienced by this district after the advent of Protestantism in Geneva. Let us quote just part of the letter of ‘information’ that Francis wrote to the Apostolic Nuncio in Turin, Bishop Giulio Cesare Riccardi, from Thonon, on 19 February 1596: ‘One part of this diocese of Geneva’ (he was talking about the Chablais) ‘was invaded by the Bernese sixty years ago, and became heretical; but after that, the area was reconquered by force by his Highness and reunited with its ancient heritage. Many of the inhabitants – moved more by the din of arquebuses than by the preaching aimed at them by the Lord Bishop – returned to holy Mother Church; but then these districts were infested by invasions from Geneva and the French, and the people fell back into their quagmire.’

The years during which Francis would work to convert this divided area fell between two important events: the abjuration of Henry of Navarre, on 25 July 1593, which allowed Duke Charles Emmanuel to recover the Chablais and weakened the pressure of Protestantism on souls, without however eliminating it (everyone feared that the Genevans would become masters of the area again); and the Treaty of Vervins in 1598, which seemed to reconcile France and Spain and bring a promise of peace, although the controversy between France and Savoy was not completely settled. For the inhabitants, therefore, these were years of political uncertainty, and as a consequence – for such was the misfortune of the time – years of religious hesitation.

These were also years of very high military expenses for Duke Charles Emmanuel. For reasons of State as well as through religious conviction, he sincerely wanted Francis to be successful with the conversion of the Chablais, but was unable to provide him with the financial aid necessary for the restoration of parishes and to establish various works, in particular colleges for young people. These circumstances would give the Chablais mission – which

could have been a very political enterprise – an unquestionably evangelical character: it was in poverty, toil, penance, conflicts that Francis would spend a lengthy period working for the spiritual reconquest of this area.

But how come Francis was chosen for this tough and dangerous ministry? Since 1589, the Duke had been asking Bishop de Granier to once again assign parish priests to the fifty former parishes of the Chablais. A year later, in February 1591, these fifty priests had once again been expelled by the Calvinists; and the clearest result of their work had been to prove that the means tried was certainly not the right one. It would have been better to send just two or three priests there, at least to begin with, but for them to be priests of considerable knowledge and deeply religious: ‘That great prelate’ Bishop de Granier, Charles-Auguste de Sales writes candidly, ‘therefore looked everywhere to find those who would have been able to spread the seed of the word of God in those lands. Almost everyone had gone to ground, their hearts filled with fear of the dangers. To be honest, he had first cast an eye on his son, the provost de Sales, but because of other considerations he had not dared to propose it to him.’ He then had the idea of calling his clergy together in assembly and asking for volunteers. ‘The magnanimous Francis, having been called to the assembly of the clergy which was held for this purpose, and seeing that no one said a word, rose boldly from his seat and said: “My Lord, if you judge me capable, and if you ask me, I am quite ready to obey, and will go willingly.” It cannot be said how joyful the good bishop was at this offer. He replied that not only did he judge him very capable, but also that it seemed to him to be most expedient.’

It is a beautiful scene, and one that conforms completely to the temperament and grace of Francis. But perhaps this account does not sufficiently underline a nuance that in no way lessens the generosity of the provost and that he himself indicates in his report to Nuncio Riccardi on 19 February 1596: ‘Since His Serene

Highness, on the one hand, and our Very Reverend Bishop on the other, have sought to remedy this illness, I came here at the order of the Reverend Bishop, not as a doctor capable of healing such an illness but more as an explorer and quartermaster to examine what needs to be done to provide remedies and doctors for the area.'

In short, more a precursor in charge of preparing the mission than a missionary properly so called; and we can better understand Bishop de Granier's words, as Charles-Auguste indicates them: 'To these words (the bishop) added his thanks for the fact that (Francis) wanted to help him in his old age, since in truth this burden would have had to fall on his shoulders if he had the strength to bear it.' So Francis would have left for the task as a replacement for the bishop. This in no way lessens his merit: the mission as precursor under these circumstances was already a very dangerous one: he would have to work in Thonon, capital of the Chablais, under the protection of Baron d'Hermance's Catholic soldiers garrisoned at the castle of Allinges. On the other hand, the apostolic Francis could not be satisfied with playing the part of the investigator or diplomat: from the outset the messenger would become a missionary, as can be seen in the report of 19 February to the Nuncio...

'Immediately, the Servant of God prepared everything that he needed for this apostolic expedition, meaning his books, but other than the *Holy Bible* and the *Controversies* of Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, he took very few things. He took with him his beloved cousin, Louis de Sales, a canon, a man with a very clear mind and gentle spirit who had already given great testimony to his capability in theological matters through his preaching of the word of God. He also recommended this undertaking to the sacrifices of his confreres, the canons, and the other good clerics and religious of the diocese.' Even accounting for the tone of edification common to this kind of biography, we can grasp, through these words of Charles-Auguste the spiritual attitude of Francis and Louis as they left for the Chablais.

One incident, moreover, would give Francis the opportunity to express his intimate feelings more clearly. He was not unaware that his undertaking was meeting fierce opposition from his father... On his way through Sales he decided to stop over some time there 'to receive (his father's) instructions. But of course the Lord of Sales would only be instructing him to remain.' The elderly gentleman's arguments were filled with human wisdom and political prudence. Francis would be facing a terrible storm. 'Relying only on God and obedience,' Mother de Chantal says 'he held firm.' 'Father,' he replied 'God will provide; it is he who comes to the aid of the strong; we only need to have courage; we are not dealing with barbarians. Beside the fact that we are not completely unknown there' (this confession of Francis is not negligible, to understand the choice that was made of him for this mission), 'we are not going there either to plunder or to pillage; we only want to attack them with spiritual weapons. They will not harm our bodies. And God, in accordance with his promise, will bestow great virtue on our words, in order to preach the truth of his Gospel. And what if they should send us to the Indies or to England: should we not go there? Certainly it would be a very desirable journey, and the death we would endure for Jesus Christ would be better than a thousand triumphs. After all, this is the will of His Serene Highness, these are the orders and mission of the Most Reverend Bishop, and nothing can be opposed to them. It is a difficult thing, it is true, and no one could deny it; but why wear these clothes if we do not want to take on the burden as well?'

Monsieur de Boisy was obstinate, and so as not to be present at his son's farewells he withdrew to the castle at Thuile, but from there, just the same, he sent out letters to certain friends in the Chablais, asking them to watch over his son's life and that of his nephew.

On Wednesday 14 September, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Francis and Louis set out on their journey. They very soon reached Saint-Cergues and discovered the magnificent

Chablais plains. They quickly made their way to the fortress at Allinges, 'situated on a round mountain', to present themselves first of all to the governor, Baron d'Hermance. They arrived at sunset. The Baron 'introduced the two new apostles to the fortress... from that prominent position one could look out over the miserable state of those provinces.'

In reality the province was admirably picturesque. But at the time, contemplating it, Francis was thinking of things quite other than the landscape: while crossing the district, the two missionaries had already noticed some traces of the ruin of Catholicism. 'I am speaking, then, *of what I have seen* and, so to say, *of what my hands have touched*,' Francis would write one day to Pope Clement VIII, 'and I am the least of men if I do not speak the truth, the most inconsiderate if I do not know. As soon as we entered those districts, a sad sight appeared before us everywhere. Before us lay sixty-four parishes; now, with the exception of the Duke's Catholic officers, since he did not want them to be of any other religion, we would have found no more than a hundred faithful out of a population of several thousand souls. Most of the churches had been destroyed or were stripped; absolutely no more cross, no more altar but everywhere the vestiges of the ancient and true Faith in ruins. Everywhere there were ministers, as they are called, meaning teachers of heresy, who pervert families, insinuate their doctrine, occupy the pulpits, all in view of sordid gain. Bernese, Genevans and other like children of perdition were terrorising the people through their emissaries to keep them away from our preaching. The truce, they said, was but a truce, peace had not been concluded and very soon they would drive out the Duke and the priests with arms: and our party, they said, would defy any attack, and would remain alone triumphant.'



Remains of the *Les Allinges* fortress

Resistance from the inhabitants of Thonon

This was the situation. Francis made enquiries with ‘Baron d’Hermance on means and ways to commence work’. Clearly it was at Thonon that they would need to begin contact with the Protestants: the city is three leagues from Allinges; of the three thousand inhabitants there were only fifteen or so Catholics, but among them the comptroller, Claudio Marin, fully devoted to the Duke, magistrate Claude d’Orlier and some friends of Monsieur de Boisly like Charles Vidomne, Lord of Charmois. Francis was already talking about celebrating Mass. Baron d’Hermance ‘found that it was not yet appropriate to be instituting the holy sacrifice of the Mass at Thonon nor elsewhere, since at night time there was no security except in the fort; so, he said, one might at least be able to find a way to preach at Thonon’. Francis followed the Baron’s advice and lodged at the castle.

On Friday 16 September 1594, the small group of Catholics met with the two missionaries at comptroller Claude Marin’s home. On Sunday the 18th, after having duly presented the Duke’s letters authorising his mission to the mayor of Thonon, Pierre Fornier, Francis met his new flock in the ancient church of Saint Hippolytus, after the Calvinist function had finished. This is how it happened: when minister Viret had finished his sermon, Francis entered the church followed ‘by the Duke’s officers and some Catholics’¹ and before this modest audience delivered a sermon extensively supported by Scriptural quotations, *on the mission of the Church’s pastors*.

From that moment on, the two missionaries never interrupted their activity: Louis chose the region of Allinges, Francis remained in Thonon, where the danger was greater. A letter of Francis to Senator Favre, a letter that most probably needs to be dated on 4

¹ Note on the back of the handwritten copy. Cf. *Œuvres*, vol. VII, p. 202.

or 5 October, tells us about these first weeks. He confesses that ‘the cloud, certainly commanded by the prince of darkness, seemed dark’ to him and also that it ‘increasingly obscures the minds of these men’.

After the sermon on 18 September, things appeared to go slightly better: ‘The governor, with some other Catholics, did not overlook anything in order to attract the farmers in the neighbourhood and the citizens of Evian to our sermons, secretly persuading them, and to advance matters of religion with ardent and enlightened zeal.’ But very soon the heretics reacted: ‘The Thonon authorities, having assembled their council (on 2 October) swore, with sovereign perfidy, that neither they nor the people would ever attend Catholic preaching... This happened, so I was told, the day before yesterday, at the town hall, and several had already taken this oath at the assembly of the godless that they call their consistory... They would certainly like us to lose hope that we could bring our undertaking to a good end, and so oblige us to withdraw.’

It means they had underestimated Francis de Sales! ‘It will not be so; so long as we are permitted to by the truce and by the will of the ecclesiastical and secular power, we are absolutely determined to work without end at this undertaking, leave nothing untried, *to beg, to begin over again with all the patience and knowledge* that God will give us. To whoever wishes to question me about this work, I maintain that not only is preaching necessary, but also that the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice must be restored as soon as possible, so that the enemy can see that by his artifices he is giving us courage rather than discouragement.’ And Francis added these few words which say much about the mixture in these affairs of politics and religion: ‘But in this we need to exercise much prudence while we wait to see if the temporary peace we are enjoying will endure.’

During that winter of 1594–1595, everything conspired to discourage Francis: the rigours of a particularly inclement season, the opposition of the Protestant ministers who held sway over the

people, the plots being woven at Annecy around the bishop to have him recalled: 'I hope' Antoine Favre told him on 31 October, 'that my messengers will no longer have to send you my letters in the solitude where you are living, but in the city where very soon, I predict, you will be recalled not only at the wish of a very solicitous father, but also through the orders of a very loving bishop. In fact both, in my presence, have spoken much about recalling you and of giving you a successor.'

To this were added 'a thousand jibes and mockeries', to use the words of one of his biographers; they called him a 'hypocrite, idolater, false prophet', accused him of magic and witchcraft. They 'hurled insults' at him, 'payed scoundrels who sought to kill him'. Let us hold to one certain and secure fact: it is a fragment of a letter of 27 November 1594 that tells us: 'Here, God has me glimpse a work worthy only of the virtue of his right hand. Today I begin preaching Advent to four or five people: all the others are maliciously ignorant of the meaning of the word Advent; and such an august time as this in the Church is held in opprobrium and derision among these unfaithful people.'

But these difficulties did not discourage our missionary: 'Prayer, alms and fasting are the three parts that make up *the cord that is not easily broken* by the enemy: with the help of divine grace, we will attempt to tie up the enemy with it.' Prayer, alms, fasting... 'He went through snow, bad weather on foot, unless the weather was so bad that it obliged him to take a horse,' Mother de Chantal tells us 'and I heard both him and the late M. Louis de Sales say that on his return (from Thonon) the Blessed went to other towns to preach, confess and do what was necessary for the good and progress of souls. These journeys were not without peril...' Things got to such a point that Baron d'Hermance offered to give Francis an armed guard – something he refused in horror – and had to do so in secret, from a distance, using a few soldiers...

Change of strategy: the *Controverses*

From all appearances it was a failure. At the end of four months of preaching, Francis had to agree that progress was non-existent. He would try another means of conquest: since they did not want to listen to him he would write.

The Protestants would receive his proofs, his arguments and refutations at their own homes: they would read them, re-read them in peace, discuss them or meditate on them. Simple leaflets, messages compiled in full combat, during the rare free moments snatched from work and daily tasks; just the same, Francis had established a general plan for them and from the beginning it seems that he was thinking of turning them into a book, one day or other. Right from the first edition, as a whole they were given the name *Controverses*, and this is what we will call them:² but we are sorry that *Meditations* or something even more expressive, like *Memorials*, has been abandoned since *Meditations* was the name Francis attributed to these writings.

As he tells us, the idea of this approach was suggested to him by 'a serious and judicious gentleman'. His 'Letter to the Gentlemen of Thonon' with which he announced his project, carries the date 25 January, 'the day of the conversion of St Paul'; but he had already begun the work on that date. Towards the end of January he apologised to his friend Antoine Favre for his delay in writing: 'I was hoping, my brother, to let you see some of our work; but I changed my opinion and decided to wait until there was, let's say, a body of material, instead of sending it to you a little at a time. I am so lacking in diligence that, needing to attend to many other tasks, I haven't even started at all... I am turning over in my mind some *Meditations* on the mutations of the heretics of our time.'

2 Here and henceforth they will be referred to by the French title '*Controverses*' rather than the English 'Controversies', to distinguish them from Bellermine's work.

A little later, certainly towards mid-February 1595, he wrote to him again: ‘You want to see the first pages of my work against the heretics: I too very much want to, and I will not hoist my colours among the ranks of the enemy with all the ardour deserved by this cause unless you first approve of my plan, the battle plan and the tactics adopted. But I feel the difficulty of the enterprise and I also miss the auxiliary troops that I would need: I mean the necessary books for a man who retains only a very small amount of knowledge in his memory. However, I have begun, and I have done so in such a way that it will be somewhat more difficult than I thought to bring my enterprise to a good conclusion... As soon as possible you will see part of my work.’

At the same time he told his friend of an important decision: ‘I will spend the rest of Lent at Thonon: this seems best to me.’ Best?



Les Allinges, chapel where Francis de Sales celebrated Mass.

To write his *Controverses*, for sure – he would be able to use the libraries of some friends; best also for the joy and courage of the Catholics there; and also for some Calvinists who secretly wanted to consult him. But what a reckless decision! Humanly speaking his gesture was imprudent and for some time he had to remain in hiding in the place where he was living.

On 7 March he announced to Antoine Favre: ‘I have finally gone down to Thonon; let the enemy be ready for a lance, vibrating with the tension of being delayed. Assailed from the distant heights of my citadel, he has scorned just terms; I will now launch the final assault.’ There was plenty of work: ‘Much more preaching has prevented me from giving the necessary attention to our *Meditations* against the heretics.’ But now, perhaps, a little bit of help was about to arrive: a famous Capuchin, Fr Chérubin de Maurienne. ‘May he soon arrive!’

Francis did not yet dare celebrate Mass at Thonon: every morning he went to the chapel of Saint-Etienne in the village of Marin, beyond Dranse. This meant that he ran a serious risk: one day Francis and his three companions, among whom a servant of M. de Boisy, Georges Rolland, were attacked on the Allinges road by two armed men. Thanks to Francis’ calm words, matters ended without bloodshed, and even with forgiveness. But Rolland rode breathlessly to the castle at Thorens to describe the adventure; Monsieur de Boisy enjoined his son to return to Annecy, and this was the letter he received towards mid-March 1595: ‘Most honourable father, were Rolland your son instead of your servant, he would not have been cowardly enough to back away from such a minor incident as he was involved in, and would not have built it up into what sounded like a huge battle. No one should doubt the ill will of our adversaries; but they make a mistake when they doubt our courage. Through the grace of God we know that *he who perseveres will be saved...* So I beg you, father, not to attribute my perseverance to disobedience...’

This is what he wrote to Monsieur de Boisy, but when he freely opened his soul, his confidences took on a different tone. In early April 1595, he wrote to Bishop de Granier: ‘If you would like to know – as it is appropriate that you should – what we have done and what we are doing now, you will find it all in the readings of St Paul’s Letters: we are on the move, but in the manner of an invalid who, having risen from his bed, discovers that he no longer knows how to use his feet, and in his frail health, no longer knows whether he is healthy or sick..’

With Fr Possevino, his former spiritual director, he was even more personal: ‘There are some relatives and other people here who respect me for particular reasons I cannot mention; and that is what keeps me so busy at work. I would already be very distressed had I not the hope that things will improve, and I also know that the miller is not wasting time while hammering away with his millstone. So, it would be a great pity for someone to tire themselves out here for nothing while they could get better results elsewhere than I could, not much good at preaching as I am, other than to walls as I do in this city.’

Finally some success to compensate for Francis’ perseverance: the famous lawyer and jurist, Pierre Poncet, renounced Calvinism. There was much jubilation in the Catholic camp and Francis received much congratulation for this conversion: this was someone ‘who enjoyed great respect... and much credit.’

Towards the Feast of the Ascension, and perhaps for some rest, Francis returned to Thorens. He spent a week at the castle in Sales, then went to Annecy. During the Feast of Pentecost, which fell that year on 16 May, he gave many a sermon. On Saturday 25 May – Corpus Domini – Francis was favoured with an extraordinary grace: ‘... At three in the morning, while engrossed in deep meditation on the most holy and august sacrament of the Eucharist,’ as we are told in more or less these words by Charles-Auguste de Sales and Fr de la Rivière ‘he felt moved to rapture by the Holy Spirit in an

abundance of sweetness... and since his heart was overwhelmed by such delight, he was finally forced to throw himself to the ground and exclaim: Lord, hold back the waves of your grace; withdraw them from me because I can no longer bear the greatness of your sweetness, which forces me to prostrate myself.' And Charles-Auguste adds: 'So filled was he with this torrent of delights, that he went away to celebrate Holy Mass; from there, he went up to the pulpit and preached with such great efficacy of words and with such ardour that his face shone, so inflamed was he by the divine embers of heavenly love.'

God sustained the soul of his missionary with these favours: and in fact the time had come to return to the Chablais. Early in June, Francis stopped over at the castle in Sales and was saddened to see that his father's opposition had not changed. Because he earned nothing from his role as provost and his father refused any aid, he left once more for Thonon in abject poverty. Duke Charles Emmanuel showed no support and gave him no help. Only his faith in God sustained him in his undertaking... At Thonon he once more found his small, faithful flock under strong counter-attack from the Calvinists: Francis' absence had reinvigorated the latter's boldness despite the presence of Louis de Sales.

Despite this, he courageously set to work again. Undoubtedly, the summer months were dedicated mostly to the *Controverses*. For example, it seems that we can choose 29 June, Feast of Sts Peter and Paul, as the date for the leaflet on *The Unity of the Church. The true Church must be one in its Head*, and that the sheet on *The Profanation of the Holy Scriptures caused by the alleged ease in understanding Scripture* was written on 4 October.³

Writing on 21 July to Peter Canisius, the Jesuit theologian whom Ignatius of Loyola had sent to the Council of Trent and whom he

3 Cf. *Œuvres*, vol. I, p. 90: *Evangile du jour d'huy*, and on p. 194, an allusion to the feast of St Francis of Assisi.

had made the first provincial of Germany, Francis told him: ‘By now I have been among the heretics for nine months and, despite the size of the harvest, I have only been able to put away eight ears of corn in the Lord’s granary... Among these converts there is a certain Pierre Poncet, a very erudite legal expert and, as far as heresy is concerned, much wiser than the local Calvinist minister. In familiar conversation with him, seeing that the testimony of antiquity influenced him so much, I loaned him your Catechism containing the teachings of the Fathers... This reading drew him away from error and opened up the path that leads to the Church. He finally surrendered, and we are both indebted to you for this.’

This letter offers us something noteworthy: Francis was grappling with theological difficulties raised by the Calvinists and that he was unable to resolve ‘not even with the help of Bellarmine’s works: I do not have here the books I need; in fact I only brought very few with me that deal with the controversies of our time.’ Noting that he was separated from Canisius ‘only by Lake Léman, so to speak,’ he proposed writing to him from time to time to put some questions to him ‘on theological issues and the difficulties they present, so as to receive, also in writing, your instructions.’

Thus we see – and must admire – the care he took to compile his leaflets and how seriously he took the arguments of the Huguenots. Were these leaflets printed? We should probably believe the Visitandines who say they were, instead of Dom Mackey who says they weren’t: whatever the case, each week a new leaflet ‘was distributed to homes in Thonon and in the countryside.’

July was not only taken up with theology: ‘I spent the whole month either on pilgrimage (meaning the *apostolic missions*), or in essential brief journeys,’⁴ he wrote from Annecy on 12 August to

4 Among which we need to include the settling of some disputes that Bishop de Granier had entrusted him with. Cf., if they are genuine, letters LV and LVI, *Œuvres*, vol. XI, p. 148 and p. 151.

Antoine Favre. Fatigue? Overwork? Beneath his ever courageous attitude we sense some tiredness: 'The harvest of Thonon is a burden beyond my strength, but I have decided to abandon it only with your approval, at your orders. However, I am continuing to prepare new workers for this work with all kinds of solutions and ruses, and to seek ways to sustain them. I see no end, no way out of the endless cunning of the enemy of mankind.'

And another valuable personal note: 'I have been tormented and still am, brother, seeing that among so many disasters that threaten us, there is so little time left to nurture the devotion we are in such urgent need of. Nevertheless, counting on the Lord's mercy, we need to lift up our hearts to better hopes... Tomorrow I return to my Sparta.'

In fact, things 'in Sparta' did improve somewhat. The letter that Francis wrote to Antoine Favre from Thonon on 18 September is a masterpiece that is enough on its own to reveal to us the missionary zeal, faith and heart of the writer: 'Finally, brother, a wider and more beautiful door opens for us to enter this harvest of Christians: in fact, it was not long ago (yesterday) that M. d'Avully and the elders of the city, as they are called, came openly to my preaching, because they had heard that I was to speak about the august sacrament of the altar. They had such a desire to hear from me the exposition of what Catholics believe and their proofs concerning this mystery that, not having dared to come publicly, for fear of seeming to be ignoring the law they had imposed on themselves, they listened to me from a place where they could not be seen,⁵ unless my weak voice had hindered them.'

And Francis further encouraged their curiosity by promising 'that in the preaching to follow, he would, through the Scriptures, put this dogma in a light that would be clearer than the full sun at noon.' At any cost he wanted to force the ministers 'out into the

5 It seems that these listeners had hidden in the organ loft.

open' and debate with them. 'It is certain: since they are agreeing to debate this, they will very soon end up capitulating, as the proverb says... The inhabitants of Thonon have agreed to present to us in writing their confession of faith in the points where it differs from ours, so that we can discuss with them in private or in familiar conversations or in writing.'

For Francis, this meant the victory of his apostolic strategy: these private discussions with the 'leading citizens' of the Chablais always seemed to him to be the most important part, the only evangelical part of his activity. Certain of his faith and secure in God's grace, he would go to these meetings not just as a partner in conversation, but as a conqueror. 'We are certainly on the right path, since they are taking up the fight through their men of rank. Our weak forces frighten them and they are thinking of offering us conditions. But as for us, God's grace gives us much courage and we await this struggle that gives us good hopes with impatience and joy.'

Unfortunately, we only have a summary of the sermon on 17 September; but whoever wishes to understand Francis' apostolic heart should read the introduction that was almost entirely written down. We need to hear him begin the discourse, after having quoted the passage from St Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 10:16): 'The great Babylon, that we see in this miserable century, was founded on this question, taken and understood in a way that is very different from how the blessed Apostle did so.'

He would not say everything that could be said about it, but what seemed to him the 'most special and more compelling. Anyone who wants to expose doubts to me, in writing or in any other way, I will be most obliged to, and I will consider it a singular favour and will try to give him in return all the satisfaction I can, with full charity and respect.'

And what an appeal he made to the Calvinists listening to him! 'I beg you, for you salvation and by the blood of the Saviour, to come and listen to the reasons of the Catholic Church, so that it cannot be

said of you that you condemned them without having heard them. On that occasion let go of all human passion; do not consider the familiarity you have with one or other side, but look only to where scripture, reason and true theology are to be found. And then, in accordance with what you see, and leaving everything else aside, resolve to embrace the better side.’ And Francis exclaimed: ‘Lord, I am here to serve you, *da mihi intellectum ut sciam testimonia tua*.’

On that same 17 September, Pope Clement VIII finally agreed on a papal absolution for King Henry IV. The news raced through Savoy as it did through France. From the beginning of October Francis rejoiced over it in a letter to Antoine Favre: ‘I learn... that the Holy Father recently sent Henry the happy message: “Health and Apostolic Benediction to the King of France.” If this is so, may peace reign by the power of the Lord! I augur that this peace will be all the happier as I see it becoming more unpleasant for all the heretics of Geneva.’

In fact, the event would have considerable influence on Francis’ apostolate in the Chabalis: the inhabitants of the districts there would be less reluctant to commit themselves, and Duke Charles Emmanuel, seeing the near future in a less warlike perspective, would show a strong desire to help Francis. Meanwhile, Francis increased his pressure on the Calvinists of the Chablais: ‘I am now pursuing these gentlemen of Thonon even more,’ he wrote to Favre ‘and I will do so increasingly when, in accordance with my ability, I have brought to a conclusion the little work I have been meditating upon for some time, and when you have approved of my undertaking.’

At the end of 1595, Francis’ activity seemed prodigious: well-known Calvinists came looking for him to discuss with him, among them Lord d’Avully, lawyer Claude de Prez. He began drafting, for the legal Code prepared by Antoine Favre (it would be called the *Codex Fabrianus*), an exposé of the principal heresies over which the legislator would need to exercise vigilance. Vigorous and ardent

pages, among the most beautiful written by Francis, they would be included in Favre's work under the title: *De summa Trinitate et fide catholica*.⁶ To even better confound the heretics he immersed himself in a study of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, after having humbly asked Rome's permission, as a simple cleric, to do so.

Finally, towards 1595, Charles Emmanuel asked Francis to explain to him '... the most effective means for realising the holy desire that (His Highness) has of seeing the people of the Chablais reunited with the Catholic Church.' Francis quickly took up this much desired invitation, and on 29 December explained to the Duke the moral and financial support he hoped for from his authority. We need to read the letter in the context of the time: unfortunately politics was mixed up with religious concerns by both Catholic and Protestant parties. Francis, as a lawyer, still visibly adhered to the traditional principle of the Catholic State: 'One faith, one law, one king'; and we now hear him demand that 'in case of obstinacy, those who persist in error (be deprived) of any office of justice and any public position'. But after this note, what we find in the letter is the apostolic heart of the missionary, his theological optimism. According to him it was sufficient that the Catholic faith be preached and heard by the heretics: grace would do the rest.⁷ He was counting especially on the re-establishment of parish priests in all the parishes and on freedom of movement for missionaries 'in all these bailiwicks,⁸ according to need.' He also asked that people

6 In particular, read the magnificent pages of the holy sacrifice of the Mass, *Œuvres*, vol. XXIII, pp. 99-100.

7 Cf. Joseph LECLERC, *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme*, Aubier, Montaigne, 1955, 2 vols, *passim*; see the index of topics under: 'Obligatory attendance at official worship'

8 Bailiwick: the office and area of jurisdiction of a *bailiff* who was in charge of the administration of justice and had administrative control.

be officially summoned to doctrinal expositions or controversies that would take place: 'They will be gently constrained, Sir'; and knowing the virtues of his friend, Senator Favre, he suggests that he be chosen to exercise this authority in the Duke's name. Finally, he requests the funds needed to set up a Jesuit College at Thonon.

Along with this letter, we need to bear in mind another letter Francis addressed to Nuncio Riccardi on 19 February 1596: with admirable clarity he explained the situation in the Chablais to the new Nuncio, as it stood following these eighteen months of work: 'Although fear of our heretical neighbours has considerably damaged the success of this enterprise, nevertheless some results have been obtained through the conversion of a few people, among whom two who were very much involved in heresy. Now, thanks to news of the coming peace, we are on the eve of reaping what we have sown so far.' In fact, peace took some time to be established. But Francis was right: the time of sowing, the heroic and missionary period was almost at an end: the time was now approaching to store the harvest in the granary.

We needed to dwell for a while on this time of sowing. Never would Francis be more clearly the 'priest of Jesus Christ' for us, an apostle like Paul or Francis Xavier. Here he was alone, or nearly alone: even when his cousin, Canon Louis, was beside him, it was Francis who bore the weight of the mission. He was poor, unresourced, and to support his needs and his almsgiving he only had some gifts that his mother gave him, unbeknown to his father.

He did not have human support: for sure, Baron d'Hermance and the garrison at Allinges were ready to protect him in case of danger, but Francis refused to preach the Gospel beneath the protection of pikes and halberds. As for the Duke, after asking him to commence the mission, he was silent, gave the missionary no official authorisation, gave him no aid, while the Protestants of the Chablais were strengthened by the assistance and wealth of Geneva and Berne.



Thonon, map of the city
(from *Theatrum Sabuadiae...*, pars II, Amsterdam 1862).

Francis worked slowly and patiently: his hope lay in God: he prayed, fasted and practised mortification; his daily Mass – celebrated in the circumstances we know about – was his great reserve of strength. He treated the Protestants who insulted him, threatened him and sometimes attacked him ‘with respect and charity’: and above all, he took them seriously. He studied, wrote and preached for them. What did it matter if there were just five or a hundred listening? Gospel, Scripture, the Church: these were what had to be presented in their purity, making them lovable and accessible. By words, certainly; but also by his life and all his faith: he the priest needed to reveal to his lost brothers the spirit and heart of Jesus Christ.

One day, presenting Francis to Cardinal de’ Medici, Duke Charles Emmanuel would say: ‘You are looking at a man who has planted the cross and the faith of Our Lord in this province.’ Never had a truer compliment been said about Francis. After all, during those difficult years, he himself had a gesture that symbolised this heroic apostolate better than any other: accused of magic and witchcraft, threatened with death, ‘he laughed, and made a great sign of the cross on himself: “Behold”, he said, “my mark and my spells.”’



5 – THE APOSTLE OF THE CHABLAIS: TIME FOR HARVESTING

Stages of success

In the early months of 1596, Francis' apostolic life would undergo some transformation. We will no longer follow him in the details of his eventful and varied life, but will insist rather on the characteristics of his spiritual make-up.

One important fact that it would seem we cannot doubt, since we know of it through two letters whose text became part of the first canonisation process, allows us to gauge the apostolate of Francis de Sales in this period and to reconstruct its atmosphere. At the Duke's court and at the Nunciature, certainly in agreement with the Bishop of Geneva, the thinking was to make him coadjutor to Bishop de Granier. Francis defended himself from this with a firmness as clear-cut as the protocols of the time allowed: 'As for the office of coadjutor, every possible reason and my personal experience forbid me from desiring it; and the duty, honour and zeal that I bear for the Most Reverend Bishop will always prevent me from thinking of the bishopric so long as God leaves him as my prelate: and my incapacity would prevent me [from accepting it] when God chooses to deprive me of him.' But by now the notion had been floated, and while Francis' authority increased because of it, his apostolate, on the other hand, would inevitably be coloured by political nuances. What is admirable is the fact that even in these official relationships, Francis would remain, above all and unfailingly the Priest of Jesus Christ.

The significant stages of Francis' apostolate during the four years from 1596 to 1600 can be thus described. First of all there was the public 'debate' with minister Viret that had been so much and so long desired by Francis: a debate which Viret and the other ministers in the Chablais and the district of Vaud whom they called on to help them ended up stepping away from. Undoubtedly this happened in the first months of 1596 and 'it was the driving force behind many conversions.'

On 26 August 1596, Baron d'Avully solemnly renounced Calvinism before the Nuncio in Turin: the recantation had huge repercussions among the Protestants and led Pope Clement VIII to write to the Baron on 20 September, but which earned the convert and Francis much slander. 'I will not neglect to tell you,' Francis wrote to Bishop Riccardi on 12 December 1596, 'that the enemy has not failed to launch all possible and imaginable attacks on this knight, to obscure the splendour that this conversion has had: a great deal of hatred has been aroused against him, both on the part of the heretics and of Catholics.'

In 1596, there was a feeling that 'something was on the move' in Thonon and the Chablais: on 14 November, Francis wrote to the Nuncio, asking him to obtain authorisation from the Duke to begin Catholic worship 'at least in three or four places if, due to the cold weather, it cannot be done in more...' 'It is already very much something to start: if Christ comes to us as an infant during these Christmas festivities, he will then grow little by little to perfect fullness of maturity. And we run absolutely no risk in doing this, apart from abandoning the enterprise and fleeing from Bethlehem should negotiations for peace break out into war; this would impede (the interests of religion) not only in the Chablais but also in many other places of the diocese. Who knows if God does not want spiritual peace to be the preparation and foundation of temporal peace?'

One of Francis' most daring apostolic thrusts can be located at the end of summer 1596: stirred by the influence that Baron

d'Avully's conversion had wielded, Antoine de la Faye, 'the ambitious, meddlesome and most mediocre La Faye',¹ decided to go personally to Thonon and show Baron d'Avully 'more clearly than the midday sun, in the presence of the provost of Sales, how fruitless was the doctrine by which he had been drawn to the Roman Religion'. Francis accepted the challenge, but 'although Baron d'Avully went to ask him to come three or four times or more', they awaited the minister in vain... since La Faye refused to come, Francis decided to go and find him in Geneva. As well as the Baron, he brought his cousin Louis de Sales with him and a group of citizens from Thonon, both Catholics and Calvinists: the group set off for Geneva... 'and went straight away', Charles-Auguste says, 'to the home of minister La Faye'.

According to the customs of the era, the debate took place in public in Molard Square. Francis came away the winner. When Duke Charles Emmanuel came to know of the daring enterprise and Francis' success, he thought once more about elevating him to the rank of Senator. This was of little importance faced with the fact that despite his promises, the Duke did not grant the missionary either official authorisation for re-establishing Catholic worship in Thonon, or the money for installing parish priests in parishes that were asking for their return, or for maintaining the missionaries: he would have done better to call Francis to Turin, giving him an opportunity to explain the situation in the Chablais.

In September 1596, Francis wrote a very determined letter to the Nuncio: "This is what makes me want even more to come to Turin to obtain a declaration of His Highness's will... Because if, as it would be appropriate to do, orders are given promptly, I will return sure and certain to see a happy harvest of some thousands of souls mature very soon; on the other hand, if orders are not given,

1 So judged by Protestant historian Paul-Frédéric GEISENDORFF in his work *Théodore de Bèze*, Genève, Labor et fides, 1949, p. 397.

I will ask his blessing and permission to abandon this enterprise to others more capable than me. It breaks my heart to see that I am not able to satisfy entire parishes wishing to feed themselves with holy Catholic doctrine, since I lack the means to send them sufficient numbers of preachers and pastors. I can no longer remain alone here and become the talk of our enemies² since by seeing no order given, they despise my ministry which, just the same, I need to be jealous of in every way.

Francis was accused of being ambitious... 'As for slanderers, I hope in the end it will be known, and God knows it, how stripped I am of all ambition: and that with these few works I do not seek to be looked upon well by my superiors other than what is needed to carry out this and other missions.' We always need to go back to this letter when we see Francis, constrained by the customs of the time, involve himself in political affairs for the good of his ministry.

Finally, then, the Duke decided to call Francis to Turin. Already autumn was making the journey across the Alps dangerous; but what did that matter? It was a wonderful occasion to defend the cause of the Chablais there where he could win. Francis left on horseback, accompanied by his faithful George Rolland, and not without risk they crossed the Great Saint Bernard Pass and arrived in Turin. The Duke gave him a very warm welcome and seemed to perfectly understand the difficulties of the Chablais: he promised Francis his official support in the form of letters patent, and offered him the stipend for six parish priests, taking it from ecclesiastical benefices held, due to the times, by the Knights of St Maurice. He asked him to indicate, in a report to be given to the Nuncio, the main requests he had made. His heart filled with hope, Francis returned to Thonon through the Little Saint Bernard Pass and Annecy.

² Note the expression indicating a serious situation, one that often appears in Francis' correspondence in this period.

But peace between Savoy and France was late in coming and indeed there was talk once more of war: 'I hear I don't know how many proclamations of war that have my hopes wavering', Francis writes; and in fact the Duke's letters patent did not arrive, and nor did the deposits from the Knights of St Maurice.

Nevertheless, Christmas was approaching and promises of conversions abounded. In his zeal, Francis decided to strike a new blow: despite opposition from the mayors and threats from Protestants, he set up an altar – a small wooden altar – in the church of Saint Hippolytus in Thonon and prepared to celebrate the Christmas Mass there.

It caused quite a ruckus, especially when one minister, Pierre Petit, asked to 'embrace the [Roman] faith'! The Provost and Elder [Petit] wrote to the Duke, each independently. 'Since the Message had gone out, the Servant of God completed what he had begun and decorated the church as best he could, given the inconveniences of the beginnings, with pictures, carpets, candles and lights: and at midnight on the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ he celebrated the most holy Sacrifice of the Mass before his children, who wept with joy and tenderness, gave them all communion and, when Mass was over, explained to them from the altar the story of this birth with such great outpourings of love that he inflamed their hearts with living embers of heavenly devotion for the divine infant, born for the redemption of mankind.' He then celebrated a second Mass at dawn and the third 'between nine and ten'.

The Duke was obliged to take a decisive position. On 7 January 1597, the letter that Francis had been waiting for for three years finally arrived: 'Reverend, dear, beloved and faithful Sir. Replying to the letter you have written, let us say that it seems good to Us that you have had an altar erected in the church of Saint Hippolytus: and similarly for the other good works that you are doing in praise of God to root out heresy; and We are sorry for the opposition you have encountered, but that you have overcome nevertheless, as you

have written to Us. Continue thus with the ability and prudence that you know how to apply, [We] having written to the Lord de Lambert that he did very well to assist the minister who wished to become a Catholic, as you and he have written to us.'

This very cordial letter from His Highness sheltered Francis from slander and attacks from the elders; and although the Knights of St Maurice took a long time to send him the promised funds to restore the parishes and tried to avoid this duty, he continued his activity in the best possible way: in 1597 he reopened the parish of Allinges, then the parish of Cervens; on 4 February, Pierre Fornier, councillor and former mayor of Thonon, solemnly renounced Calvinism; Lent was re-established at Thonon, not to mention Ash Wednesday ceremonies that had the Protestants laughing; as Easter was approaching, Francis was overwhelmed with work, preaching, confessions: on 23 April 1597 he wrote to the Nuncio Riccardi that 'the new Catholics have worn me out with their general confessions but I have had enormous consolation seeing them so devout.'

In the meantime he was dealing with Rome, with the Nuncio, on very serious matters and received very secret missions of extreme importance from Clement VIII, such as meeting with Theodore Beza in Geneva. Subjected to this kind of life his health faltered: in March he had 'a small fresh outbreak of fever' and had to look after himself. He wrote to the Nuncio from Sales on 11 April 1597 that 'I have been forced to absent myself for a few days to be present at the Synod, put some things in order and forestall an illness that has been threatening me for some time. This absence, however, will be brief and I will return with more ardour to take up the interrupted works once more.'



Francis de Sales' confessional in the cathedral church at Annecy.

Bishop de Granier chooses his successor

He did return to Thonon but at the end of April set out again for Annecy: 'I received the news that our Very Reverend Bishop was very ill and that feeling he was in danger of death, was extremely desirous to see me. I left immediately.' One could guess why... Bishop de Granier wanted to appoint Francis as his coadjutor with right of succession. Francis 'absolutely refused'. His wishes were of a totally different kind: since the parish of Petit-Bornand was vacant, he asked if he could have it and its benefices so he could have 'what I need to live on according to my situation': in exchange he offered to resign as provost, asking a single favour: that of 'keeping the simple role of canon, so that when I come here there will be a place for me in our choir, since the offices are celebrated with such dignity that they are one of my great consolations.'

But Bishop de Granier held to his plan. He even won over Monsieur de Boisy and Francis's family; yet 'Francis continued to refuse with very admirable humility. The Bishop left nothing untried and to succeed, availed himself of every measure that came to mind; he obtained the Duke's assent and sought to have the letters patent dispatched to him.' On 16 June, if we are to believe a letter from Nuncio Riccardi, His Highness' decision had already been taken. But the time for Francis' assent had not yet arrived.

He returned to the Chablais and worked as head of mission: in fact he had been given three helpers, two Capuchins, Father Esprit de Beaumes and Father Cherubin de Maurienne, and a Jesuit, Father Jean Saunier; added to these collaborators were the parish priest of Annemasse, Fr Balthazar Maniglier, and Canon Louis de Sales. At this point Father Cherubin de Maurienne, who played an important part alongside Francis in the Chablais Mission, decided to strike a further blow: at the beginning of September, at Annemasse, just five leagues from Thonon and close to Geneva, he organised a solemn Forty Hours devotion in honour of the Blessed

Sacrament. Nothing was spared so that the three days would have extraordinary splendour: Duke Charles Emmanuel, prevented from being present by concerns of war, was officially represented by Lord d'Albigny, governor of Savoy. It was a great tribute to the Eucharist.

Shortly after these grand ceremonies, Bishop de Granier decided to launch his final attack against Francis' humility. One day when the provost was in Sales, the bishop sent his main chaplain, M. Critain, to him. The day after his arrival, under the pretext of saying the holy breviary together, M. Critain took Francis to the castle balcony and tackled the matter head-on... Francis resisted for a long time. Finally he suggested to the chaplain that they go to the church in the village to celebrate their masses: 'You will say the first and I will serve it; I will say the second; we will invoke God's grace and do what he inspires us to do.'

Francis came away conquered by prayer: 'Tell My Lord,' he told M. Critain on their way back, 'that I have never desired to be bishop... But since he wants it and orders it, I will be ready to obey and to serve God in everything.'

The matter risked ending there: shortly afterwards, going through Annecy, Francis 'fell into bed with a strong and violent continuous fever'. It came to the point that early in January he despaired of his life. His mother went down to Annecy and 'was chosen to give him the news that he would die...' The poor patient 'first of all marvelled', and was then assailed by great fear of God's judgement and the 'dangers of hell'. He overcame this first crisis by trusting totally in God's mercy. 'I must not hope for salvation except from the Lord; I shall have as much need for his mercy another time as I do now, and he will be as favourable to me now as he will at another time.' The canons from the cathedral 'came as a body to him for the final farewell and to receive his holy blessing...' Exhausted by this visit, Francis fainted 'for a whole hour', so much so that they thought he was dead.

At that juncture he was assailed by a temptation against the dogma of the Eucharist. It was a terrible trial and Francis could free himself from it only 'by calling on the name of Jesus from the depths of my soul'. When he came to his senses, he found the solution he had not been able to find at the height of the crisis: but the memory of this struggle remained a poignant one for him. He never wanted to reveal what happened; and 'recalling it... he always made the sign of the cross, fearing that it might be a stumbling block for weak minds'. Thus God continued to purify this privileged soul and introduced him deeper and deeper into the mystery of his Passion and Death, to make him his most faithful image.

Francis had escaped death. His convalescence would be long. On 14 January 1598 he sent a letter to Nuncio Riccardi, but, as he said



Francis de Sales preaching to the people (painting by Piero Dalle Ceste, St Francis de Sales church at Valdocco, Turin).

in a separate note: 'The doctors do not believe it opportune for me to be writing and have obliged me to make use of another's hand.' This dictated letter is a moving one. 'After being visited by God's goodness with an ongoing fever, recently I had such a perilous relapse that for seven consecutive days nothing was expected other than my death.'

Nevertheless, he need to think about going to Rome for the *ad limina* visit of the diocese and for the final formalities for his episcopate. But when? 'Now that by the same divine goodness I am convalescing, I still feel such weakness, especially in the legs, that I do not know if I will be able to go to Rome before Easter, however infinitely much I would like to be there for Holy Week: and therefore I will make every effort to do so.' Meanwhile his thoughts had flown to the Chablais where Father Cherubin de Maurienne had replaced him; he urged that matters in progress be brought to a conclusion: 'His Highness has sent President Favre to Thonon to get to know the feelings of the inhabitants of the Chablais on practising Catholic worship, and almost all have testified that they want it and are anxiously waiting for it to be re-established.'

Promotion to bishop had not changed Francis' heart! 'Finally, since God has given me this bit of life that remains, I recognise that I must employ it in the service of his divine Majesty, of the Holy Church...' And so it would be, for much longer than he foresaw at the time...

Francis dated the few letters that have come down to us from 1598 as coming from Sales. But in April he wrote to the Nuncio: 'Today I am going to Thonon where I am needed for some time.' The fact is that Father Cherubin, full of initiative, had suggested to Francis that he celebrate the *Forty Hours* in Thonon even more solemnly than those at Annemasse! On 2 May 1598, Philip II of Spain and Henry IV signed the Treaty of Vervins: it seemed that peace had come to savoy; the Chablais would be safe from incursions from Geneva; the population could return to Catholicism without fear

of reprisals, and Charles Emmanuel would have his hands freer to help the missionaries of the Chablais.

The provost immediately sought to profit from the advantages of the new situation. In July, several parish priests, ‘mature men and experts in pastoral work’, were installed in important parishes. Finally, on 20 September, after many material and diplomatic difficulties had been resolved, the *Forty Hours* at Thonon began. Bishop de Granier presided in person at the religious ceremonies on Sunday 20 and Monday 21 September. Some days later, on the first and second of October, the second *Forty Hours* took place in a grandiose atmosphere: present was Duke Charles Emmanuel surrounded by his court, And also Cardinal Alessandro de’ Medici, papal Legate in France. Returning to Italy he had agreed to stop over at Thonon.

Everything was splendid. But among all these ceremonies, one in particular had to have moved Francis’s soul. On the morning and afternoon of Thursday 1 October, the Cardinal, Bishop de Granier and Francis received the recantations of elders... one pastor... some groups... entire families... The following day this rhythm accelerated. The secretaries ended up writing down only the names of the heads of families. According to the lists still preserved today in the Vatican archives, two thousand three hundred names were registered over eleven days.

In those days of lavish festivities, how many memories – and how many actions of grace – rose up in Francis’ heart! Barely four years earlier, alone, this poor missionary deprived of human assistance had penetrated Thonon. Faced with the crowds flocking to recant over those days or to take part in the sacraments of Eucharist or Penance, how could it have failed to remind him of the few dozen frightened Catholics who, by force of persuasion, had succeeded in gathering around his pulpit in the church of Saint Hippolytus on Sunday 18 September 1594? Then he had preached on the *Mission of the pastors of the Church*; today, at the close of these ceremonies,

in the presence of the Duke and the Cardinal and their courts, he preached on the Mass and the priesthood: *Do this in memory of me*. To which of these two sermons did Francis dedicate more heart, more care?

The Duke was sincere in his gratitude. As soon as Cardinal de' Medici arrived at the town hall, Charles Emmanuel took the provost by hand and led him before the prelate: 'Your Eminence' he said, 'I present to you the apostle of the Chablais; you see a man blessed by God and sent to us by heaven. Inflamed with great zeal for the salvation of souls, and not without great risk to his own life, he came here first, courageously, to this province, spreading the seed of the word of God: he planted the cross and the faith of Our Lord in these districts where more than seventy years ago they had been uprooted by the infernal bands of heretics.' The Cardinal, having asked Francis who was kneeling at his feet to stand, said to him: 'Sir, I thank you for your zeal, continue as you have done up till now; as for me, as is the duty of my office, I will not fail to report extensively to the Holy Father what you have done.' And in fact he kept his word.

Francis' apostolic heart

'The apostle of the Chablais': the praise was deserved. As the final echoes of these lavish festivities dies down and before Francis sets out for Rome and the episcopate, it is appropriate for us to pause and once again contemplate Francis de Sales, the priest, in mission territory. What was the apostolic strategy of this young priest – he was twenty-seven years of age when he entered the Chablais in September 1594 – that allowed him to succeed, in four years, in converting a province so riddled with Protestantism and so solidly defended by nearby and very powerful Geneva?

Certainly, when examining this success, we need to bear in mind the events and also the politics. Certainly Henry IV, like all the sovereigns of the time, hoped for religious unity in his kingdom and externally could not too openly support Protestant countries. On the other hand, France was at war with the House of Austria and therefore had to deal carefully with the Swiss Calvinist Cantons that controlled the alpine passages: Geneva was a key city, one of the ways to access Germany. With regard to Italy, French foreign policy was no less ambiguous: Henry IV needed the Pope's friendship in France; but he also needed to not upset the Italian princes who were in dispute with the Pope. The Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel, very skilfully played his games of intrigue in this imbroglio. Even the Treaty of Vervins (2 May 1598) did not put an end to the controversy with Henry IV: in fact, the Saluzzo affair, the marquisate of North Italy that Charles Emmanuel had taken from France in 1588, remained unresolved. The Edict of Nantes, signed by Henry IV on 13 April 1598, shows us the compromise that the King was forced to lean towards to gain peace for his Kingdom internally. And similarly externally: he had to seek a difficult balance between his Catholic and Protestant alliances. We will see this soon: Geneva and Berne, for this reason, continued to be very powerful at the court of Henry IV – and therefore, sometimes more, sometimes less as events evolved, paralysed the activity of Catholic missionaries in the Chablais, the bailiwick of Ternier and the district of Gex.

These difficulties have at least one advantage, that of highlighting the truly evangelical nature of the apostolate of Francis de Sales.

His strength lay in his faith. One day he made up a very significant anagram with his name: *'Foi sans descaler'*, that is, faith without defect or weakness; it was not coined in vain – Francis was deeply convinced of the truth of Catholicism. He was convinced that if the teaching of the Roman Church were presented in all its light by holy and well-instructed priests, the populace – as long as their

freedom of conscience was effectively guaranteed – would return to the ancient faith without hesitation. In short, from then on Francis, as a theologian and jurist, had a precise notion of what Church reform had to be like if the Church was to survive; at the same time that he became aware of the evils devastating the Church of Christ, he also became aware of the remedy, the only remedy that could save it: the restoration of a priesthood worthy of apostles. Let us underline the broad outlines of this strategy, as holy as it is daring: they clearly result from the writings, memoirs and letters that have been preserved for us.

First of all there is a need for the Gospel to be preached in all its purity of tradition and theological interpretation. Francis spared nothing to keep up to date with Protestant objections and the problems his adversaries drew from the science of their times:



Annecy, *le Thiou* canal.

he in no way underestimated them. He took the Calvinist reality seriously, its causes, its strength, while not ignoring the fact that the people, and also some ministers, could be ignorant: 'In this bailiwick,' he wrote one day, 'everyone has (Calvin's) Institutes in hand; I find myself in places where everyone knows the Institutes by memory.' To get to know it better he asked permission from Rome to read this work that had been placed on the Index. The *Controverses* show Francis' spirit and style in these battles of ideas. In such a way he worked to solidly establish the truth and rights of the Roman Catholic Church in the face of his adversaries' denials. And he succeeded so well in those little works and flyers written at the height of battle day after day, that the *Controverses* were found worthy of use in 1870 by the Fathers at Vatican Council I when defining the infallibility of the Pope, and they earned Francis the title of Doctor of the Church in 1878 and in 1923 the title of Patron of Catholic writers.

Francis preached convinced that evangelical doctrine, so long as it was known, worked on souls and grew in them like a root in the ground, in accordance with the will of Providence. He was tireless in this ministry of the word that he considered one of his first duties. Sometimes we could see him preach in four or five different villages in a single day, sometimes 'spending the night preaching' or even preaching to seven or eight people as he would do in a church filled with the faithful, or even catechising in the square, debating in public or in a small group with pastors and Protestant elders: with the help of his younger brother Bernard, he invented a kind of dialogue preaching.

'Last Sunday, the Third Sunday of Lent,' he wrote for example on 12 March 1597 to Nuncio Riccardi, 'after preaching in the early morning, as usual, in the parish of Allinges, I went to another parish three miles away, called Cervens, where I had not yet been. Having let the people know that I would willingly preach, I had a numerous and benevolent audience and, at the end of the sermon,

they showed me their keen desire for this *bread of the children*. But I found great difficulty in arriving in time for the sermon at Thonon, five or six miles from Cervens. So by staying here it is almost impossible for me to evangelise several places.’

Already in his apostolic strategy he gave primary importance to the catechism, solid and simple teaching of doctrine, the sacred text of Scripture, the word of God. Did he not, perhaps, always carry a bible with the breviary in his meagre luggage? He knew the Bible well, and even his most intimate correspondence is filled with biblical quotations.

From that moment, we would like to see Francis de Sales in dialogue face-to-face, if not heart-to-heart, with certain Protestants, or capture, for example, his intimate conversations ‘in the fields’ with Baron d’Avully troubled by conversion. Three of these encounters are famous but nevertheless mysterious: his three meetings in Geneva with Theodore Beza. Did the initiative come from Francis or from Clement VIII? It is not so clear. What is certain is that Francis undertook this attempt at conversion only after formal consent from the Pope that looked very much like an order.

No documentation of these conversations remains from the Protestant side;³ from the Catholic side there is – other than the testimonies of the Canonisation process – a letter of Francis de Sales to Clement VIII, on 21 April 1597 written, therefore, immediately after the first conversation. It is a severe letter but not without hope: ‘I found Beza alone and fairly easy to reach. When I finally withdrew after having tried all means to get him to confess his thinking, without having left any stone unturned, I found in him a heart of stone, thus far unmoved or at least not sufficiently shifted; that is, a hardened old man full of bad days. Insofar as his words allow me to judge, my personal opinion would be this: if it

3 Cf. P.-F. GEISENDORFF, *Théodore de Bèze*, pp. 402-407.

were possible to speak with him with greater frequency and calm, perhaps it would be possible to lead him back to the Lord's fold; but any delay is risky for an octogenarian.' Yet at least we can recall the words Theodore Beza uttered when he farewelled his visitor after the first two conversations: 'As for me, if I am not on the right path, I pray to God daily that through his mercy he may put me back on it.'⁴ This attitude of Theodore Beza's would not have displeased Francis de Sales. And in fact it is in keeping with his way of dealing with heretics. Here we touch on a very delicate problem. It is certain that Francis de Sales sometimes had very harsh words for the Huguenots. It is just as certain that in the political dealings that followed the *Forty Hours* at Thonon, Francis opposed with absolute firmness the continued presence of Protestant ministers in the Chablais and in particular in Thonon, and demanded severe measures against the last stubborn ones at Thonon who 'follow the Huguenot doctrine more as a party than as a religion'.

So, was he partisan to the intervention of the secular arm in religious conversions and events? We need to make some distinctions, since Francis de Sales evolved regarding this point during the course of his life. The law student at Padua, too inclined to follow some of the law theses of the time, would perhaps not have disapproved of the use of political force and not even of the use of arms. But after his appointment as provost and especially after being ordained priest, Francis firmly declared that he was partisan only to spiritual arms, holiness and theological science, 'charity': we recall the young provost's sermon to the canons of Geneva! However, at the end of his mission in the Chablais, when Francis finds himself involved in political discussions, two seemingly opposite tendencies emerge in his thinking: on the one hand his love for souls leads him to be meek, but on the other hand, in accordance with the ideas and customs of the era, he does not see

4 *Ibid.*

that political unity can be achieved outside of confessional unity: 'One faith, one law, one king.' Apparently, the jurist in him seems to be in disagreement with the missionary. But in real terms the conflict did not exist for Francis de Sales: his theological optimism convinced him that if Protestant worship was forbidden, and if the Calvinists were taught the Catholic faith, they could only but convert if they were at least loyal and sincere.⁵

An example will help us grasp Francis' thinking on this issue. On the same day that the Peace of Vervins was promulgated in Annecy, 13 June 1598, Francis wrote to Nuncio Riccardi: 'Among the incalculable spiritual benefits that many servants of God hope for from this blessed peace, they promise that the King of France, at the invitation of the Holy Apostolic See, will make every effort to ensure that the city of Geneva opens its doors to the exercise of Catholic worship through the *Interim* [the Interim was a formula dating from the time of Charles V and in practice ensured the freedom of conscience for Catholics and Protestants], so that the Lord and Prince of peace may have his place in such an important and much desired peace. This would mean cutting Calvinism off at the roots.'

Thus, two months after the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes (13 April 1598), Francis was hoping that legislation very similar to the new French legislation would be installed in Geneva. Now, three years later, in July 1601, Francis de Sales, writing to Clement VIII in the name of Bishop de Granier, seems to be speaking a very different language: 'This part of my diocese (he is talking about the district of Gex), with what remains of it beyond the Rhone, is up to the King of France, by virtue of the treaty of France (the treaty of Lyons, 17 January 1601). He has ordered that Catholic worship be fully restored there, at least that is what I hear has been said, but

5 Protestants, for their part, maintained the same principle: cf. J. LECLERC, *Histoire de la tolérance...*, vol. II, pp. 126-127.

with the reservation (called the *Interim*) that tolerates the presence of heresy. This basically means leaving everyone the freedom to think badly and act similarly: and here is something that greatly increases the difficulties of spreading the Gospel.' It is easy to see the point of contact between these two different judgements: in either case the aim is the same: to spread the Gospel; in the first case, the Interim facilitates the task: in the second case it makes it more difficult. To understand this position, it is not enough to invoke the political ideas of the time alone: one must also know certain theological concepts that were too narrowly defined and which exaggeratedly reduced the possibilities of salvation that heretics in good faith also had, despite their error.⁶

We also need to make a neat distinction between Protestantism and Protestants. Dealing with people, Francis was filled with patience and kindness, a welcoming spirit. Some people reproached him for this, including some religious. When told of these reproaches, Francis replied 'that for a long time his experience had been that he gained more by kindness than by any other way... It must be held as certain that people do more out of love and charity than out of severity and rigour'. He was especially aware that by converting, some lost their positions, resources and possessions. He endeavoured to organise aid for them, procure shelter and housing. Had it been up to him, Thonon would have had a Jesuit college from 1595 or 1596. In 1598, when he saw requests for conversion coming in, he had another project close to his heart: we find an outline of it in a petition Francis addressed to Pope Clement VIII in January 1599, acting on behalf of Bishop de Granier: it concerned a foundation to assist new converts coming from Geneva who were 'stripped of all their goods': ... 'a house of mercy or hospice of virtue. There, these creatures banished for the love of Christ, especially children and young people of both sexes, could be welcomed, raised and

⁶ *Ibid.*

educated in a Christian way. Each one, according to his or her abilities, would be taught the sciences, or some trade that would later allow them to earn their livelihood.'

Francis revealed these truly exceptional gifts as organiser, implementer of ideas, and, I was about to say, politician in the best sense of the word, also in his approach to Catholics in the Chablais. He was fatherly yet firm with them, demanding yet kind, strict but benevolent. Let us boldly take this burning example: the problem of financing the mission in the Chablais. As for Francis himself, he was rigorously poor and did not complain about this poverty, happy to be 'a faithful disciple of the cross,' and to imitate Our Lord Jesus Christ; if by chance he had a few coins, he would give them away as alms. However, he knew that this poverty, unless God imposed it upon him, should not be of the kind that would inhibit his apostolate, or even more, give scandal to souls. From the end of May 1595 he confided in his friend Antoine Favre: 'It is also (a great argument against my apostolate) seeing men living a precarious life and, so to speak, in the midst of the Church's estates and under a Catholic prince.' On 31 May, he requested a vacant parish benefice, the Petit-Bornand parish: 'It is very much the case that being provost does not bring in a cent of income, and being a canon brings the provost on average just sixty *scudi* a year; so it would seem more advantageous to me to be a parish priest with income than a poor provost, were it not for the hope of returning to Geneva... Thus, having what I need to live according to my conscience, I seek none other than to serve the Lord and the Church of this diocese in the small jobs in which I will be employed.'

But little by little, as the mission was successful and developed, Francis came into dispute with the great benefactors of the diocese: how could parish priests be installed in parishes if they are not given what they need to live on, and indeed if we do not begin by repairing churches ravaged and devastated by the Calvinists? How do we introduce preachers into the Chablais, Capuchins or

Jesuits, if we do not ensure their sustenance? How do we found essential works without money? But there was money around: the Order of the Knights of St Maurice and Lazarus, in 1579, was made a depository by Gregory XIII of the ecclesiastical goods that had escaped the Bernese; in Turin, in 1596, the Duke approved Francis's plan whereby the Knights must make available to the Chablais mission the annuities of these assets, at least partly. But they sneered at this idea. From then on, for Francis, this conflict with the Knights would be a constant concern: through the Duke, the Nuncio, he endeavoured to wrest from them what they, in their miserliness, were refusing to give him...

So it was that on 21 February 1597 he made them face up to their responsibilities in very clear terms: 'This solution' he told them among other things, 'consists of the fact that since the desired Peace Treaty has been signed, Your Lordships agree absolutely to cede all the benefices you enjoy in this territory, with their annexes and connections; if to these we add those coming from private individuals, we could offer a religious service in this bailiwick so resplendent that light would shine from all sides.' When it was a case of 'fighting the battles of the Lord of Hosts', Francis was not afraid of 'bothering His Holiness, Their Highnesses' and the Knights. This legal and financial intrepidity that went so well with his profound sense of personal poverty, is a true symbol of Francis' apostolic attitudes.

It is impossible to doubt the righteousness and purity of these intentions in all these temporal matters: we see this clearly when he was choosing parish priests for the Chablais and installing them. He wanted these missionary parish priests to be men who were 'mature and very expert in pastoral work'... 'appropriate for the work of conversion and ecclesiastical solemnities'... He had no illusions about the difficulties that awaited his co-workers: on 2 March 1597, from Thonon, he wrote to the Nuncio: 'I have a

good number of priests who will soon be able to free themselves to come here to practise patience and mortification; I will put all my care into making sure that they are rich in a holy life, and at least well provided with knowledge.... But it does not seem possible to introduce them without having first prepared the way for them with some catechetical sermons given by an experienced preacher.' It would seem that since then he had been thinking of procuring for these chaplains a 'home and dwelling and making it easy for them to live in small groups'. But the time had not yet matured for carrying out this project. While waiting, he visited those he had placed at the head of parishes, helping them as much as he possibly could 'with both a fatherly and brotherly love'. And what sorrow – we could almost say resentment – Francis felt regarding 'fat abbeys' that had fallen away from regular observance, 'in which the monks (who are such only in name) destroy more than they build'.

This is how Francis appears to us at the end of this missionary period and on the eve of sharing with Bishop de Granier, and under his authority, care for the bishopric of Geneva. This thirty-year-old priest had already shown the measure of his ingenuity and holiness. To characterise him, we could do no better than make our own the penetrating judgement of Sainte-Beuve on 'The Completeness of Francis de Sales',⁷ but giving it a spiritual application. Applying Pascal's thinking to Francis: 'I do not admire the excess of virtue... for otherwise it is not to rise but to fall. We do not display greatness by going to one extreme, but in touching both at once and filling all the intervening space,' Sainte-Beuve comments on this synthesis of opposites in Francis de Sales in some unforgettable pages: 'No one better than (he)... had, in such high quality the union, temperament, corrective and extensive, and ultimately, in Pascal's words, the *entre-deux*, the intermediate space. To each of the characteristics

7 Charles-Augustin SAINTE-BEUVE, *Port-Royal*, 3a ed., Paris, Hachette, 1867, vol. I, pp. 249ff.



Francis de Sales being welcomed by Pope Clement VIII
(engraving by F. Chauveau).

that I have previously recognised, we should add its opposite, which appears not to counterbalance and divert, but to modify and strengthen the dominant quality, entering into it, merging into it, to make it balanced and stable, as within the quality itself. Already on this earth his soul is a complete sphere under a single star.' He provides a luminous example of this synthesis of opposites by declaring that Francis 'was not a dove of gentleness, but an eagle of gentleness.'

Terms that could be mutually exclusive could, then, be combined in his case. Francis de Sales is really typical of plenitude rather than of measure: he lacked nothing, opposites in him were not contrasts or dissonance, but a superior harmony. His writings, if we follow them too closely and consider exclusively the *Introduction to the Devout Life* or the *Treatise on the Love of God* – even his *Correspondence*, and if we savour only his letters to Mme de Chantal or other privileged souls – serve him badly by only displaying some sides of him. If we misunderstand the missionary of the Chablais, we falsify the spiritual director; if we misunderstand the man of action and government, we falsify the writer; and above all we falsify the mystic when we misunderstand the richness of the man, his capacity as a jurist, the subtlety of his politics. The one 'enters into' the other and 'merges with it'. Let's talk about balance, if there is no better term. But this balance is not an earthly, slippery, flat balance: it is the higher balance that flies high, the balance that can only be given by the freedom of love.

Sainte-Beuve has introduced this mystery of grace, yet without penetrating its depth: 'Moving from contrast to conciliation, I arrive at a final *intermediate quality* that is characteristic of Saint Francis de Sales and that is the only one that can end up giving us his measure: I mean the alliance in him between mystical, contemplative virtue, charity in all its candour and the finesse of human judgement in all its sagacity.' Sainte-Beuve needed to go one step further, or better still, cross a boundary in Francis' soul: he

needed to see that all the human gifts of his hero – remarkable ones and among the most beautiful that exist – had reached that fullness only because the fire of God’s love had burnt all their dross and purified their defects, illuminated them from within and somehow transfigured them.

6 – BISHOP AND PRINCE OF GENEVA

Francis goes to Rome

We left Francis de Sales amid the resplendent festivities of the Forty Hours at Thonon. Here, the apostle of the Chablais had received his reward; the Duke's provisions are such that there is reason to hope for a rapid total conversion of the province. 'So, *winter having fled*, spring was shining, and everywhere one saw rising "the precious and resplendent tree" of the life-giving cross; everywhere the Church made its songs heard like *the voice of the turtledove*, and the renewed vineyards, *flourishing anew*, exhaled their perfume.' This is how Francis would describe the situation in the Chablais in 1598 in a report addressed to Clement VIII in 1603.

Early in November 1598, Francis left for Rome in the company of Lord de Chissé, Vicar General and nephew of Bishop de Granier. At Modena he reached his brother Louis and friend Antoine Favre who were also to be members of the party. The travellers arrived in the Eternal City towards mid-December. Francis was in charge of presenting the Pope with various requests from Bishop de Granier, and the Vicar General for his part had to request for Francis the bulls for his role as coadjutor. Clement VIII's welcome was extremely paternal: he knew Francis well and spent a long time with him on his work in the Chablais.

Just recently, Cardinal de' Medici had spoken to His Holiness about the wonderful *Forty Hours* at Thonon; Francis presented Bishop de Granier's requests then withdrew. It was 15 January 1599.

There was now the need to await the Pontiff's decisions. 'I had never been in any place', Francis wrote to Bishop de Granier some

days after the papal audience, ‘where the weight of responsibility was so hugely felt as in this Court. His Holiness would not grant any grace, no matter how small, without it first being weighed and re-weighed with the advice of the cardinals, who, seeing *il Santissimo di questo parere* (how Holy Father-like was this advice),¹ also became Pope with him’.

Francis took advantage of his free time to visit certain high-up Roman personalities, ‘cardinals and holy monks’, and to wander around the churches and convents of the city. On 15 March, Lord de Chissé obtained a second audience and presented the Pope with the request for the coadjutorship. The pope immediately showed that he was very favourable to this proposition, had Francis called and told him that he wanted to grant the Bishop of Geneva all that he was asking... but he enjoined him to prepare himself to sit for the canonical examination the following Monday, in his presence.

Francis was very surprised at this announcement, given that the priests of the Savoy were dispensed from this examination, according to the privileges of the Gallican Church. What would the Sovereign Senate of Savoy and His Highness have said?² But since the Pope said that ‘it was only for his pleasure and to make (Francis) recommendable to the whole Sacred College of Cardinals’, it was necessary to obey.

When Monday came, Francis went to the Pope’s palace. ‘He found the room full of people...’ His Holiness presided; eight cardinals were seated around the Pope, among others the Cardinal of Florence, Cardinal Borghese, Cardinal Baronio and Cardinal Borromeo; twenty Archbishops, Bishops, Generals of Orders; Bellarmine was among the theologians tasked with attacking the candidate. It was truly a special examination committee! Everything went to

1 This is in Italian in the original French text.

2 In fact, passing through Turin on his way back from Rome, he had to calm the Duke’s unhappiness about this. Cf. *Œuvres*, vol. XII, p. 9.

perfection, so much so that the fear was that this success would be overestimated at Annecy. On 26 March 1599 Francis wrote to Louis de Sales: 'I simply admit to you that God did not allow us to be confused during the exam, even though I was only looking at myself and expected nothing else... The signs of paternal goodness with which the Pope has honoured me oblige me to be more than ever a good son and good servant of the Holy Roman Church; but whatever our friends write about it, remember... that in the end we are only what we are before God.'

On 25 March, Feast of the Annunciation, Francis was admitted to the Pope's Mass where he received communion from the Pope's hands. There, he received 'particular favours from Our Lord', and immortalised the memory of it in a note whose text we record here: 'Having received the Holy Eucharist from the hands of the Sovereign Pontiff on the day of the Annunciation, my soul was very much consoled within; and God gave me the grace of great lights on the mystery of the Incarnation, letting me know in an inexplicable way how the Word took a body through the power of the Father and through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the chaste womb of Mary, by his express desire to dwell amongst us from when he was a man with us. The Man-God also gave me heightened and delightful understanding of transubstantiation, his entry into my soul and the ministry of the Pastors of the Church.'

At the end of spring 1599, Francis was on his way back to Annecy, not without making a pilgrimage to Loreto for the second time.³ In Turin, where he stayed, the Knights of St Maurice 'knowing that I was the bearer of the writ from His Holiness conferring on the Bishop of Geneva the authority to apply all the annuities that they have from converted parishes to the maintenance of parish priests, pastors and preachers, made me cite them as justification for my

3 If Francis did not go to Rome when he left Padua in 1591–1592, it is worth assigning to this journey in 1599 much of what historians say about his stay in 1591–1592.

administration.' On that occasion the Knights saw that beneath the benevolence of the prelate were hidden the severity of the jurist and the justice of the apostolic man...

Coadjutor of Bishop de Granier

For two years, Francis de Sales, titular bishop of Nicopolis, would live in the shadow of Bishop de Granier. A shadow that he loved and, in a way, created: in fact he obstinately refused to be consecrated or even to wear episcopal garb while the Bishop of Geneva was alive. And as was right, it was in the name of the reigning bishop that the coadjutor dealt with all ongoing matters. For the most part they were matters concerning the Chablais; joys and disappointments alternated: parishes organised themselves, but not without difficulty, the Jesuit college was approved and also financed by the Pope, but the Provincial in Lyons did not have men available. And then in August 1600 war broke out again in Savoy: it is true that the King had signed the Treaty of Paris with the Duke on 27 February 1600; but the Duke stalled, schemed, dodged; with a lightning attack, Henry IV invaded Savoy...

The day the Bernese entered Annecy, the Bishop of Geneva's position became very delicate: Henry IV was the enemy of the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel, Sovereign Prince of all the Genevan territory – but not of the Duke of Genevois-Nemours, to which Annecy belonged, and that exercised a kind of sovereignty over the city. The Duke of Genevois-Nemours had been very careful not to be part of the conflict. What should be done? All the more so since the inhabitants of Geneva and Berne were endeavouring to infiltrate regions reconquered by the French and once again destroy Catholicism.

It was in these circumstances that Francis saved his region for a second time; he went around the region in person, revived

courage, supported missionaries and parish priests and, more importantly, won the diplomatic battle with Henry IV; the King promised Bishop de Granier that 'nothing would be reversed in the province of the Chablais of what had been done for the faith'. Finally, on 17 January 1601, peace was signed at Lyons between the plenipotentiaries of the Duke and the King of France. But the political situation of Catholics became more uncertain than ever: if Charles Emmanuel kept Saluzzo, he had to cede Bresse, Bugey, Valromey and the district of Gex to France. What would become of these provinces, seeing that the King had no scruples (already demonstrated during the occupation of the Chablais) in letting the notorious Huguenots govern in his name?

On 26 August 1600, Francis had already sent Nuncio Riccardi a sad letter, enlightened nevertheless by an essential consolation: 'Among so many of the afflictions with which it pleases God to chastise us for our sins, it but remains for me to write to you, except that in this infirmity divine virtue has shown itself in the constancy of our converts at Thonon. Threatened on the one hand by incursions of the Genevans, then on the other by the Bernese, they have remained firm in our holy religion. It is true that until now they have received only threats, since the heretics have not yet come down. But the fear that the King might end up making use of these infidels would be sufficient to considerably shake the weak courage of the converts.'

An illness of Bishop de Granier further complicated the situation: 'Our Very Reverend Bishop is still somewhat ill, both as a result of the hardships endured in the Chablais last month, and because of the pain we feel seeing things take such a bad turn... The Fathers of the mission are still in the Chablais, even though spread around different places for fear of the Genevans or the Bernese. Most of the parish priests remain in their parishes, even if some of the more timid ones have withdrawn to see how things will end up.'

Had not the circumstances of the Catholics become perilous? The following year, diplomatic negotiations would open in Paris:

they would be extremely thorny ones and the results would be meagre and precarious.

In the meantime, towards May 1600, *The Defence of the Standard of the Holy Cross of Our Saviour Jesus Christ* was published by Jean Pillehotte, bookseller in Lyons. This was Francis' response to an old work by minister La Faye: it was certainly a late response (La Faye had written his *Short Treatise* in 1597, immediately after the *Forty Hours* at Annemasse), but it was a work truly worth of Francis de Sales' ingenuity: 'The language of war is different from the language of peace', the author said. This language of war is a language of clarity, precision, of the power of argument: intense dialectic, passion for the truth, security of doctrine, fidelity to tradition; here we find the style of the *Controverses*.

In addition, this book, which could only have been a weapon of combat, is transformed into a treatise on asceticism by Francis' grace: his fundamental idea of religion is already the one that would animate his works on spirituality: 'The true and pure essence of adoration lies in the inward act of the will with which one submits oneself to him who is adored; and knowledge, an act of the intellect, precedes this submission as its basis; on the contrary, outward action follows this submission as its effect and consequence.' The book did not have the success that one might have predicted in bookshops; but it helped many souls very effectively to remain faithful while the new Protestant tornado was unleashed on the Chablais and other regions of Savoy.

Summing up 1599–1600 in a letter of 18 March 1601 to Nuncio Riccardi, Francis was able to offer him this 'consolation: that of letting him know that... at Thonon and Ternier... they suffered much under the governance of the Lord de Montglot, a Huguenot, and from the various treacheries of the Genevans (at Ternier especially, they had carried out a real tyranny and committed unmentionable indignities against things sacred), nevertheless, despite everything, among such a great number of converts, only four relapsed. Thus

it was clear that their change had been wrought *by the right hand of the Most High*, since, as *antiperistasis* (as a counter-blow) they celebrated Christmas in quite an unusually lively way.’

Very soon (28 June 1601), Francis was even able to tell the Nuncio that ‘despite the war, the number of converts has grown from Christmas until today’, and a few months later (21 December 1601) he wrote to Nuncio Tartarini, Bishop Riccardi’s successor: ‘I will report to Your Lordship on the progress (of religion) in this diocese, telling you that it is a very happy one, not only at Thonon and Ternier, since this is already something well known; but also, and very recently, in the bailiwicks of Gex and Gaillard that stretch to the gates of Geneva. Last week, in the second of these bailiwicks, the Bishop of Geneva reconciled eight churches for the use of some thousands of souls brought back to the faith from Pentecost until



Thorens, parish church in which Francis was consecrated bishop.

today. In the first, which is under the King of France, three parishes have been created in which three of our canons have been installed for holy preaching. They are working very fruitfully there, since in this region there were many old Catholics whose faith was hidden and covered over like fire beneath the ashes of Huguenot worship that was the only one practised for seventy years; now that this faith has been uncovered by the breath of the divine word, they are bearing witness to the truth. Others are also converting, and still others are ready for conversion.’

Seeing all this, Francis was finally planning to realise one of his great apostolic dreams: to build a *Holy House* at Thonon, for which he already had the bull of erection, signed by Clement VIII and dated 13 September 1599, but which circumstances had not allowed him to pursue until this moment. This House, which the Bull (writ) called a ‘Hostel of all sciences and arts’ placed under the patronage of Our Lady of Compassion, was a very original and, in so many ways very modern idea: it comprised a prefect and seven priests and brought together ‘people converted to Jesus Christ, of whatever degree, status, order and condition they were... (to be) educated and formed in Christian doctrine, the sciences, arts and all virtues.’⁴

However, Francis did not harbour any illusions about the obstacles still preventing the realisation of this dream: ‘But above all we ask’ he said, ‘that we start the work soon, in real terms and seriously, since good intentions are worth little. If this good thing cannot be done all at once, let it at least be done little by little, beginning with the most necessary parts like the college, seminary and so on.’ Effectively, the Bull would not be promulgated until 1602.

That year 1601, at the request of Bishop de Granier, Francis preached the Lenten series at Annecy. On the morning of Friday

4 *Mémoires et documents publiés par l'Académie Salésienne*, Vol. V, supporting document number 25.

6 April, just as he was about to go up into the pulpit, the Reverend Aimé Bouvard came to tell him that the previous evening, Monsieur de Boisy had ‘very gently rendered his spirit to God.’ ‘Blessed Francis, joining his hands and lifting his eyes to heaven, adored the God who lives forever and ever and did not renounce going up to the pulpit, where he acted so well and continued his sermon so that no one noticed that he was in the least disturbed. Having come to the end, he changed topic and dismissed the people with these words: coming here I learned of the death of the person to whom I am obliged more than any other: I ask two things of you, first of all that you grant me a day or two so that I may perform the final obsequies, and then that you pray to God for the repose of his soul.’

After Lent, Bishop de Granier and his coadjutor went to visit the parishes of the Chablais and to reorganise them.



Thorens, monument to St Francis de Sales.

Bishop de Granier was now presented with a delicate problem: the King of France had shown himself most favourable to the re-establishment of Catholic worship in the district of Gex; that meant he needed to bring back parish priests to twenty-six parishes in that region.

However, caught between his intention to favour Catholics and his concern not to upset the Protestants, Henry IV was not talking about restoring to these parish priest the benefices taken over by the Protestants. So what would the priests live on if they could not recover their income? Bishop de Granier asked Rome for His Holiness to put pressure on the King. Rome gave the order to the Nuncio in Paris. But the Nuncio was not very much aware of the real situation of religion in the district of Gex, and needed a competent adviser. Bishop de Granier, whose health at the time was very poor and who for three years had already had the habit of entrusting the more serious matters to his coadjutor, sent Francis to Paris to deal with the matter of Gex with the Nuncio to France and with the King.

The sojourn in Paris in 1602

On Wednesday, 2 January 1602, Francis de Sales, for the second time in his life, walked the streets of Paris, accompanied by Canon Déage and Antoine Favre. The group arrived in Paris on Wednesday, 22 January: Francis went to stay in rue Saint-Jacques, as he did when he was studying there.

As soon as he had arrived, Francis presented himself to the Nuncio in France. Innocenzo del Bufalo was very well disposed towards him: however, he told him that nothing could be done on behalf of the Catholics in Gex unless they first won over the Lord de Villeroy to the cause, since the King had made him responsible for

French foreign affairs. On 8 February, Francis wrote to Bishop de Granier: 'After the court returned to this city, the Nuncio deigned to go to the Lord de Villeroy with whom His Majesty had directed us to negotiate, and there I had much to discuss about what we demand. However, in the end, I presented my fundamental request, about which he tells me that the Council will do right and justice by us and that we must not doubt it.' In reality this 'excellent hope' came about slowly and even more so, partially; only in September would Francis redirect his steps towards Savoy.

If nothing else, this forced sojourn would bring Francis many spiritual and apostolic advantages: it gave him, so to speak, his human dimensions, removing him once and for all from any distinctive regional identity and facing him with the great problems of the world and the time. When Francis left Paris, he had discovered the French Court, with all its pomp and circumstance but also its intrigues and games of influence; he had preached there and drawn a brilliant audience to his pulpit, often as frivolous as they were sensitive; he had mingled with the surprising religious renewal then affecting high Paris society. 'Some saints, some real saints, in great number, and everywhere.'⁵ He had won over many minds and hearts... and among all these successes and all this work, in his daily life he had shown the holiness and charity of the true priest of Jesus Christ.

Everything depended – judging from human perspectives – on the fact that Francis, in Paris, sometimes visited Princess Marie de Luxembourg, the Duchess of Mercœur: it was, according to him, a 'a relationship of respect and affection... I could not fail, since she was part of my heritage: in fact my father, grandfather and great grandfather had had the honour of being pages, and of spending a good part of their lives in the home of the illustrious princes of Martigues, the father, grandfather and great grandfather' of the

5 H. BREMOND, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, vol. I, p. 95.

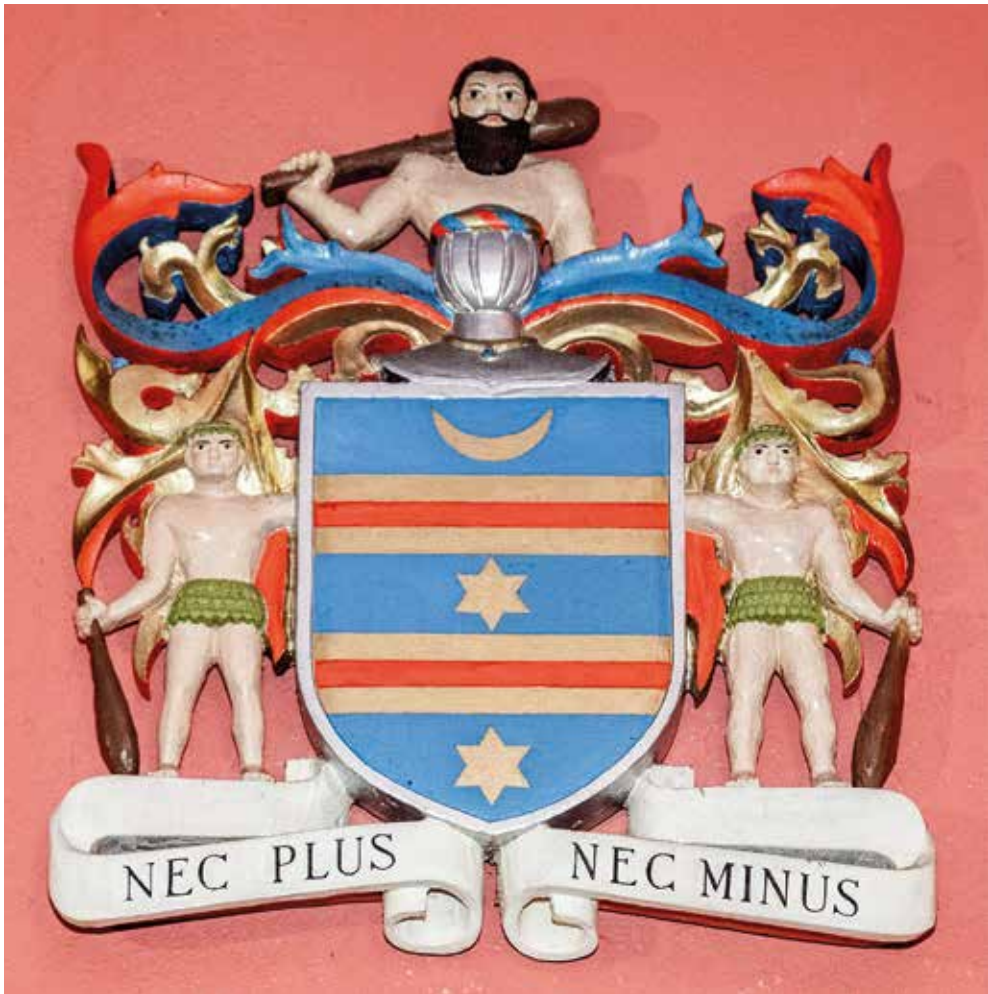
Duchess. It then happened that shortly before Lent 1602, 'by chance the Queen's chapel in the Louvre was without a preacher': Francis was asked. Having no other occupation than to await the 'outcome of his business', he had to accept: 'So as not to be lacking in courtesy, I am constrained to preach in the Queen's chapel three times a week' he wrote on 9 March 1602 to Lord de Quoex – before princesses and courtiers, being unable to say no to the requests and orders made of me. But this is understandable,' Francis adds with finesse to his Roman correspondent, 'without delaying the solicitation I am slowly making, to assist the mood of those who have the matter in hand, and to whom I am obliged to adapt.' As unexpected as it was, this Lenten preaching was a genuine success: and to add to the edification, the preacher refused the 'very beautiful purse filled with gold *scudi*' that the Princess de Longueville had brought to him as payment. Our courtiers could not believe their eyes.

Meanwhile, the Genevans were scheming with Minister Villeroy to see that the coadjutor's request would fail, and the matter of the district of Gex became 'so delicate to deal with and such a bizarre procedure' that early in April 1602, Francis even feared he would be returning to Annecy 'without any luggage other than hope'. Yet it was not his fault: he increased the number of letters and steps he took...

At this point an incident occurred that put a more favourable slant on negotiations. Henry IV, having heard so much praise of the Savoyard preacher, 'wanted to see him in the pulpit'. Francis went to Fontainebleau and on 14 April, Low Sunday, he preached before the King. 'On Low Sunday the King had me preach in his presence and showed that he was happy with it.' Francis spoke at length with the King after this sermon. It was fortunate, because otherwise the negotiations for the district of Gex would have certainly been a lost cause. On 18 April 1602, he wrote to Lord de Quoex: 'I am now returning from Fontainebleau where all my negotiations would have been lost had I spoken out. However, I have done so much that I have

regained some hope; within two or three days all will be completely resolved. It will not come with all the satisfaction we would like: we need to pull what we can from the fire. Listening to the experts, it will already be a lot... The way things proceed in this Court is so difficult that when you think you have succeeded you find yourself in the midst of complications.'

The future bishop of Geneva was definitely in a tough school but it was a finishing school for him as the diplomat. From one



Francis de Sales' coat of arms.

disappointment to hope, then from hope to another disappointment, things dragged on until September... and in reality the results would be meagre. Giving an account of his mission to Pope Clement VIII, Francis drafted this disappointing summary: 'It seemed that nothing would counter the hope we desired. But, misery of our times! After having taken so many steps for these blessed negotiations, we have barely gained authorisation to celebrate the sacred mysteries in three places, with concession, to this effect, of an annual income for our priests. As for the rest, the King personally reminded us of the harshness of the times: "More than anything else" he said, "I would want the complete restoration of the Catholic religion, but my power does not measure up to what I want," and other similar statements. So after nine whole months, I am forced to go back having concluded almost nothing.'

'Having concluded almost nothing': perhaps, at the level of negotiations, this was exactly the case. But on a spiritual level, it was the opposite. Francis had done a lot and had learned even more. He preached 'more than a hundred times', heard confessions, converted people, visited convents and monasteries where he restored fervour to many souls. But above all, Pierre de Bérulle – then a simple priest and eight years younger than he was – introduced him to the home of Madame Acarie, whom Bremond did not hesitate to call 'a new Teresa'.⁶ Her salon was frequented by Asseline, Marillac, by the Carthusian monk Beaucousin, and by the most devout individuals in Paris.

It seems that Francis de Sales had immediately wielded real influence over this group which was already so fervent: some chose him as a confessor and spiritual director; but over this period he received more than he gave. Among those who gathered in this way, mystical graces and even extraordinary phenomena were not uncommon.

⁶ H. BREMOND, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, vol. I, p. 96.

The most favoured seemed to have been Madame Acarie herself, who very soon placed full trust in Francis: 'She opened her heart to him, not only in the sacrament of Penance, but also in private conversations.' In his dealings with his penitent, Francis conducted himself with extreme discretion and did not question her about the extraordinary graces that the Holy Spirit granted her; later he would experience some kind of regret: 'What a mistake I made, not benefiting from such holy conversation: she would in fact open her whole soul to me freely; but the great respect I showed her meant that I did not dare inform myself of the slightest thing.' Not that he himself had not already experienced in many circumstances the privileged states in which God makes himself sensible⁷ to the soul; but in these kinds of graces, every experience is original and every soul has something to learn from other souls: this explains Francis' regrets.

Francis de Sales' encounter with the Acarie group had two extremely important consequences for the religious history of France: 'At these meetings it was resolved, through his advice and at the wish of (Madame) Acarie, that the Carmeline (sic) Sisters of Saint Teresa (Teresa of Avila died in 1582, so twenty years earlier) should come from Spain, and from Rome some priests of the Oratory of the Name of Jesus⁸; which happened so fortuitously that with the King's consent and the support of the Sovereign Pontiff, the Princess de Longueville increased religion in Paris with a new monastery after Blessed Francis wrote about it to His Holiness and

7 Here we are of a different view to that of Fr Antanas LIUIMA, *Aux sources du Traité de l'Amour de Dieu de Saint François de Sales*, Rome, Librairie Éditrice de l'Université Grégorienne, 1959, vol. I, p. 185, and of Fr. SEROUE, *De la vie dévote à la vie mystique. Sainte Thérèse d'Avila Saint François de Sales*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1958, Chap. X and XI. – Our statement is based on an analysis of the texts which unfortunately we are unable to develop in this brief work.

8 The oratory was founded in Rome in 1564 by Philip Neri. Pierre de Bérulle introduced it into France in 1611.

broadly informed the Apostolic see.⁹ This first Carmel was opened in Paris in October 1604.

At the end of September 1602, when Francis de Sales left for Savoy, he left with some regrets. Undoubtedly his diplomatic mission had not had complete success; but at least he had won the heart of Henry IV who had then wanted to appoint him as an archbishop in France and even offered him a ‘huge stipend’ that the prudent Francis turned down with great difficulty. He also bore the closely guarded comforting memory in his soul of many confessions, conversions, confidences and, especially, the joy of having taken part over many months in the prodigious spiritual progress whose effects would very soon make themselves felt throughout France and even beyond French borders. It would not be too much to say that Francis de Sales returned to Paris after having reached a kind of human and spiritual maturity. The early letters of direction he would write after his return testify to this, showing him in full possession of his spiritual teaching, of the kind that would flourish in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, the Spiritual Conferences and the *Treatise on the Love of God*. ‘Sudden, complete and definitive self-realisation’, Henri Bremond dared write when speaking of this metamorphosis of Francis de Sales.¹⁰

On his way to Lyons on 29 September 1602, Francis learned that Bishop de Granier had died ten days earlier, his soul still dazzled by the triumphant Centenary at Thonon he had just presided over. For his coadjutor it was a moment of great sadness: Francis wept for a long time for the man who, for ten years, had been a real father to him.

9 Among the letters that Francis wrote to Rome on this matter, we have at least the one that he addressed to the Holy Father in November 1603. The Parisian meetings in which the introduction of the reformed Carmel in France was studied and decided on, according to the letter to the Pope, lasted “ ‘a few days’; it seems the last was held on 5 June in the Carthusian chapel in Saint-Georges.

10 H. BREMOND, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, vol. I, p. 98.

Consecration in the church at Thorens

Thus Francis' fate was sealed. He must 'occupy the laborious and dangerous office of bishop'. 'Let what God's providence desires', he wrote to a friend on 21 October. 'I am always the same as before; I do not desire the bishopric any more than I desired it before. If it comes to me I shall have to bear it; if not, I will be much better off...' And how could it be possible that the bishopric would not come to him? The consecration was established for 8 December. 'I received episcopal consecration on the day of the Virgin Mary's, Our Lady's conception, and I have placed my destiny in her hands', he would write on 10 January 1603 to Bishop Giovenale Ancina, Bishop of Saluzzo.

To satisfy his mother's wish, Francis chose Thorens for 'the solemnity of his consecration; the reason being the fact that his mother and brothers lived there, the wishes and prayers of his subjects and, as well as this, the natural leaning he had towards his home town that seemed to deserve to see him anointed bishop, just as it had seen him born and made a Christian.'

He wanted to prepare himself for this grace of consecration with a lengthy retreat. 'He wrote to Fr Jean Fourier,¹¹ a Jesuit, who was then at Thonon, asking him to do him the favour of coming to Sales to direct him in the review he wanted to make of his entire life. Free, therefore, from all other thoughts, he remained for twenty days almost alone, and with continuous prayers, fasting, bodily penance and other similar exercises, he prepared himself for the general confession of his sins; following this he prescribed a rule of life for himself, consulting his wise director.' Mother de Chantal says she

11 Fr J. Fourier appears in Francis de Sales' life at least three times: he was his director at this retreat in preparation for his consecration; the *Introduction to the Devout Life* would be published on his advice; and finally, Fr Fourier would be at Francis' bedside in Lyons as he lay dying on 28 December 1622.

had seen this rule of life ‘written in his own hand’ and had read it. Of themselves they contain a brief treatise on the priestly ideal as presented by the Gospel: poverty, fasting, alms, prayer, confession, contact with his ‘people’ and, at the heart of all this a life of grace and charity, ‘the most holy Sacrifice of the Mass that he would celebrate every day unless prevented by some extreme need... It would not be inappropriate that he celebrate Mass on specified days of devotion in the churches where these were scheduled so that when they went there the people would find their bishop always at their head, and similarly for the solemn feast days in these churches.’ Francis insisted that Fr Fourier put his signature to this rule of life.

On 8 December, ‘from early morning the people began to walk from Sales to Thorens’. The parish church was lavishly carpeted and decorated. The ‘consecrating prelates’ were ‘Vespasien Gribaldi, Archbishop and Counte de Vienne, Primate of the Gauls, Thomas Pobel, Bishop of Saint-Paul or Trois-Châteaux, and Jacques Maistret, Bishop of Damascus, of the Carmelite Order’. The ceremony took place in accordance with the ritual. But according to Mother de Chantal’s testimony, ‘during his consecration, it seemed to him ingenuously that the most adorable Trinity imprinted inwardly on his soul what the bishops were doing outwardly on his person; and he also seemed to see the most holy Mother of Our Lord taking him under her protection, and the Apostles St Peter and St Paul at her side, protecting him. That is how his own words seem to me to be’ says Mother de Chantal.

For a month ‘after his consecration as bishop’, he spoke ‘like a man who was beyond this world’, ‘and although concerns of office have somewhat dampened the agitation of the heart, the resolutions, by the grace of God, have remained with me’. Note the date of this sharing: 1619!

On Saturday, 14 December 1602, the new Bishop of Geneva solemnly entered Annecy and was enthroned in the cathedral church. The day after was the Third Sunday of Advent: at Vespers,



Ancey, castle and ancient homes alongside *le Thiou*.

Francis ascended the pulpit, spoke about the Nativity, but suddenly 'as if caught up in ecstasy, told his people, without noticing, all of the wonders that had happened to him during his consecration'. Ten years later, on the anniversary of the ceremony, he would write to Madame de Chantal: 'I said in my sermon that ten years had passed since I was consecrated, from when God took me away from myself and to himself and then gave me to the people, that is, that he converted me from what (I was) for me into what I would be for them.' His life as a bishop would be the putting of this ideal into practice: every day he would be 'taken by God and given to the people'.



7 – THE BISHOP AMONG HIS PEOPLE

In accordance with the Council of Trent's Reform

‘He immediately applied his mind to the major issues and urgent affairs of his diocese.’ One thought dominated: being the bishop that the Church wanted in his diocese; the bishop as conceived and defined by the Council of Trent in its desire for reform. Francis himself lets us know of his intimate dispositions in that first year as bishop. One of his friends, Antoine de Revol, was appointed Bishop of Dol and asked him for his advice. On 3 June 1603, Francis replied to him with a long and admirable letter that needs to be quoted in its entirety: ‘You are entering the clerical state (Antoine de Revol was not yet a priest) at the height of this state. I will tell you what was told to a shepherd chosen to be king of Israel: *Mutaberis in virum alterum*; you need to be completely different both within and without. For this great and solemn change to occur, you need to turn your mind upside down and stir it up everywhere... To have assistance for this change, you need the help of the living and the dead: the living, since you must find one or two men of high spirituality whose conversation you can rely on. It is a great relief to have some confidants for the spirit... As for the dead, you need to have a small library of two kinds of spiritual books: some for you insofar as you are a cleric, and the others for you as a bishop... I beg you to have all the writings of Granada,¹ and think of him as your second breviary... you will use him mainly to train your mind to the love of true devotion and all the spiritual exercises that are

1 Luis de Granada (1504–1588), Spanish spiritual writer from the 16th century.

needed... to read it fruitfully, however, you should not devour it but weigh it and esteem it, and ruminate on it one chapter after another and apply it to your soul with many considerations and prayers to God. You need to read it reverently and devoutly... I almost forgot to tell you that you should absolutely make the resolution to preach to your people...’

However, Francis had too much apostolic experience to believe that his ideal of the bishop could be realised without wounds and ‘a multitude of imperfections’. A few days after his consecration he had written to Lord de Bérulle: ‘There is no remedy: we will always need to be washing our feet, since we are walking in dust.’

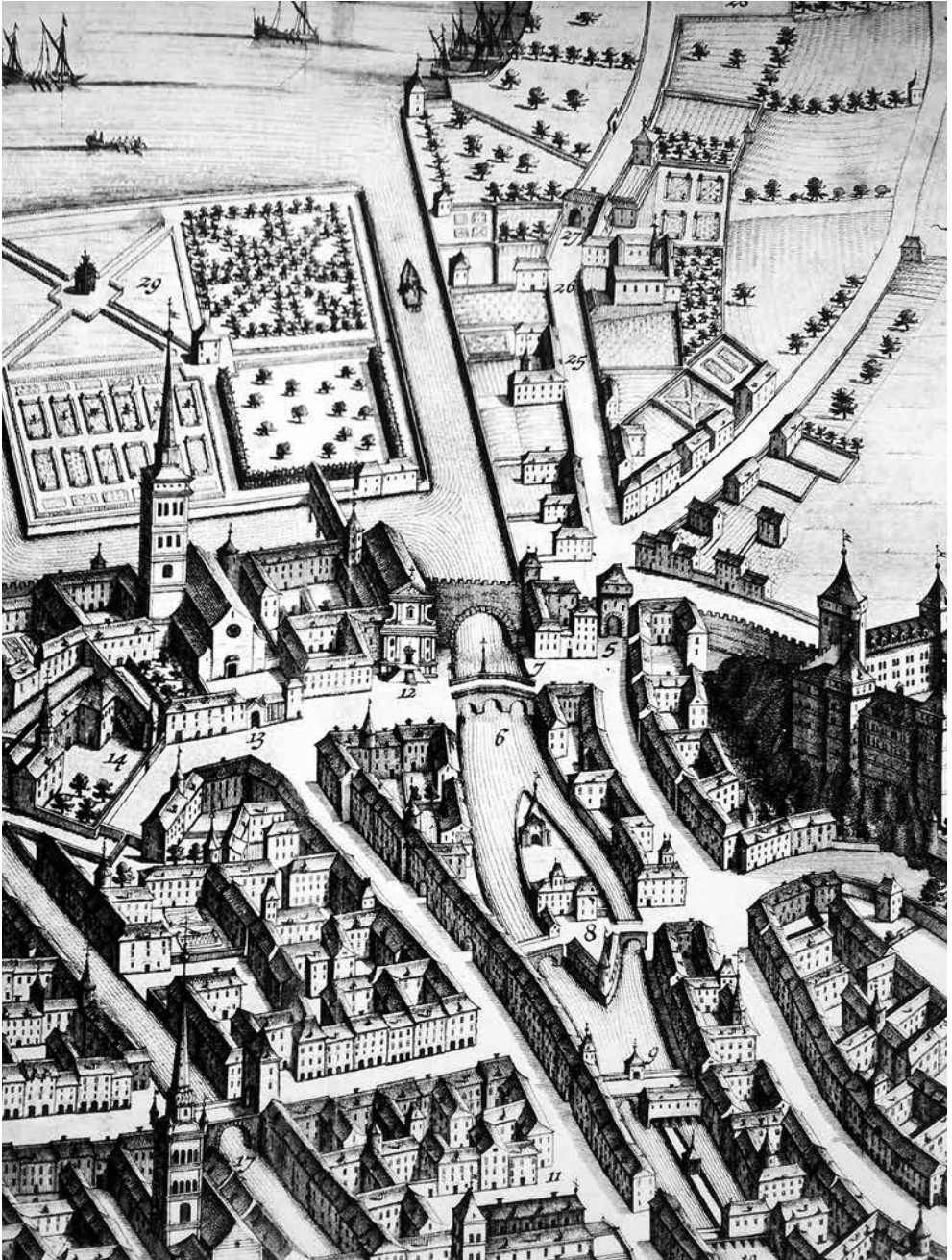
Here then is how Francis de Sales was entirely dedicated to his diocese. For twenty years he would dedicate his days and nights, his work and his waking hours to it. If occasionally he had to be away from it, he would always do so with some regret and not without some fear that his absence could harm it; and in general he did so to do it a service. He accepted very few of the numerous invitations to preach that came from his bishop friends: and indeed he knew that Duke Charles Emmanuel, proud as he was of his Bishop of Geneva, was not very happy to see him triumphing in other pulpits, and was particularly afraid of the esteem shown him by Paris and the King of France. Francis also felt some remorse at neglecting the sheep of his own fold for other sheep. There was much to be done in the Savoyard diocese.

Other than the fact that the closeness and greed of Geneva continued to weigh heavily on certain ‘districts’, despite the peace, there was a need to restore, correct, and see that everything – souls in the first instance – returned to true Catholic fervour. The territory over which he exercised jurisdiction as the Bishop of Geneva was a large and beautiful one, but some villages or groups of farms were difficult and also dangerous to reach, especially in winter. Episcopal financial resources were meagre and did not permit grand undertakings.

But all this would not mean much if a secret evil were not threatening everything he tried to build up. Francis knew this evil, had already denounced it; but now that he was bishop, he was more deeply, more personally aware of it: it was the evil that all the Church was suffering from, the evil that had resulted in the flowering of Protestantism, the evil which, certainly, the Council of Trent had decided to apply the most vigorous remedies to, but that was being healed so very slowly. 'He also spoke to me with the utmost frankness,' Mother Angélique Arnauld said one day, 'and I can assure you that he hid nothing from me of his most secret and important thoughts about the state the Church found itself in and the behaviour of certain Religious Orders.' Mother Angélique Arnauld also spoke of a lengthy confidential exchange she had with the Bishop of Geneva: 'My daughter, there are reasons here for weeping... There is a need to weep and pray in secret that God may put his hand where men do not know how to do so... We must ask him... to reform the abuses that have crept into the behaviour of the Church's ministers, and to send her holy pastors animated by the zeal of St Charles, who endeavour to purify it with the fire of their zeal and their knowledge, and to make it spotless and wrinkle-free where discipline is concerned, as it is where faith and doctrine are concerned.'²

This conversation between Bishop de Sales and Mother Angélique could only have been in 1619, but the allusion to St Charles Borromeo (and Lord de Bérulle, also mentioned) leads us to infer that from 1603 this was Francis de Sales' thinking. Fresh out of the University of Padua, Francis had wanted to visit Milan, the city where the holy bishop had died seven years earlier. He always had the most fervent devotion to him, and this had grown with the friendship that bound him to St Charles' cousin, Cardinal Federico Borromeo. It is certain his zeal for Catholic reform was

2 Cited by C.-A. SAINTE-BEUVE, *Port-Royal*, vol. I, pp. 210-211.



Map of Annecy
(from *Theatrum Sabaudiae...*, pars II, Amsterdam, 1682).

very much part of this devotion. In the spring of 1613 he would go in pilgrimage to the tomb of his saintly model; and while celebrating Mass before the crystal casket, would be taken up in rapture...

For twenty years Francis de Sales would strive to bring about in his diocese of Geneva what Charles Borromeo had achieved in his diocese of Milan, meaning reform in accordance with the ideal defined by the Council of Trent.

Let us outline the path of these twenty years of episcopate. October 1603: convocation of the diocesan synod that brought together at Annecy 'all the clerics of the diocese, abbots, priors, deans, canons and rectors of parish churches' – Francis' first contact with his clergy as a whole. Lent 1604: first Lenten series in Dijon and encounter with Jeanne Frémyot de Chantal. From 1605 to 1608: diocesan visitation in four stages. From 1606 to 1610: the wonderful period of the Florimontane Academy. 1609: *The Introduction to the Devout Life*. 1610: on the Feast of the Trinity, 6 June, Madame de Chantal, Lady de Brécharde and Mlle Favre withdraw to Galerie House in Annecy and there founded the Visitation of Our lady. 1616: in August he goes to Lyons, the *Treatise on the Love of God* published by Pierre Rigaud. 1618–1619: Francis spends time in Paris for the third time.

Simple reference points in a life completely dedicated to his service of the diocese. Francis belonged completely to his people.

Faithful to the spirit of the reform *in capite et in membris*, Francis de Sales began the sanctification of his diocese with himself and his household. His tenor of life was a very simple one. He was poor: poor in personal resources, he had given all his patrimony to his brothers; poor in episcopal resources, his bishopric gave him only a thousand gold *scudi* annually; poor because he gave away so many alms publicly and secretly; poor because he wanted to be, to live 'like the Apostles'. Staff at home was reduced to the essential, his table was frugal, his clothing 'clean and decently mended', but destined to last a long time; at home, 'the largest one in the city of

Annecy' that Antoine Favre had placed at the disposition of the bishop in 1610, he had a very modest room for himself. 'I will go around every day' he said, 'as the Bishop of Geneva, and at night will retire as Francis de Sales.' He did not have a carriage and horses. 'Although he was raised to a dignity as high as that of bishop, he did not flatter himself in his way of life, as many do. He observed strict abstinence and fasting, and very often disciplined himself till blood flowed.'

But above all he prayed: in the morning an hour's meditation, and whenever it was possible for him – following the resolutions he took at the time of his consecration – two hours for study, study that was always prayer in some way: he said his Office with great devotion, both kneeling and walking. He said Mass every day towards 9, generally in the intimacy of his oratory in the bishop's house; but he liked, 'on the specified days of devotion', to find his people again and celebrate in one or other church or chapel in Annecy. He had a taste for beautiful liturgy, and if he was celebrating pontifically was quite strict about the observation of the rubrics. In his eyes, the Mass was the culmination of particular devotion and public worship; to celebrate it and celebrate it well was his first duty as a pastor. Only then would the 'work and hardships' begin...

Action, however, also meant meditation for him, since it meant being deeply united with God's will. 'Stay very united with Jesus Christ and Our Lady and your good Angel in all your things,' he would advise Mme de Chantal one day 'so that their multiplicity does not disturb you nor their difficulty dismay you. Do one thing after the other as well as you can and faithfully apply your mind to this end, but sweetly and gently. If God grants you a good result then we will bless him for it; if not, we will bless him just the same...' We can be certain that this was his personal approach in the 'annoyances of this world'.

But in the end it would happen that tiredness would take control of his body and his soul would feel repugnance: then the Bishop of

Geneva would seek his salvation in God. Less than five years after becoming bishop he wrote this delightful note to a friend in Dijon: 'I will spend this Lent residing in my cathedral and re-clothing my soul somewhat, since it has become almost completely unstitched by all the worry it has had to bear... It is a broken clock; I need to take it apart piece by piece, and after cleaning it and oiling it, put it back together so that it chimes properly.' He did this whenever possible, respecting the resolution taken during his retreat for his consecration: 'Every year, for a week, and even longer when I can, I will make a retreat and purify my soul.'

The Bishop of Geneva radiated this devotion. A peace and charity that attracted hearts emanated from his person; when he walked through the streets the children would surround him and cling to him: the poor crowded the bishop's house or his confessional. Nothing repelled him nor did he reject anyone... Wonderful tales were already being woven around him: let us not forget that in Thonon, in 1598, during the *Forty Hours*, a dead child came back to life while Francis was praying kneeling beside his bed... or that at his consecration at the church in Thorens, he was caught up in ecstasy for half an hour... already the clothes he touched, the medals he distributed, the little items that belonged to him, that he used were sought out as relics... Little by little as the years passed, the admiration and enthusiasm of the good Savoyard people for their bishop increased. He was enveloped in an atmosphere of sacred legend.

How could it be otherwise? Not all the graces that the Lord bestowed on him could be kept secret. Though some of his intimate moments of enlightenment – such as the ecstasy at the castle de Sales when it was revealed to him 'that he would be the founder and teacher of an order of sisters, (and was shown) the imagination or ideas of the main people from whom this Order would take its beginnings' – could, strictly speaking, have escaped those who surrounded him, how would he have been able to keep

so many extraordinary deeds hidden: the freeing of the possessed, prophecies and the ability to read souls, the healing of paralytics or the sick, etc. and even the raising of a dead woman to life from a distance? We point out in passing that these miracles continued long after his death, at the saint's tomb, or from a distance. To quote just two examples, it is certain that Pope Alexander VII, who beatified Francis de Sales on 28 December 1661 and canonised him on 19 April 1665, considered the Bishop of Geneva to be a 'miracle worker' – and contemporary accounts of the Beatification festivities in Annecy indicate that behind the silver casket where Francis de Sales's remains were kept walked 'paralytics he cured and those he raised from the dead'.³

But the most constant miracle of his life was that life itself. Francis had admitted this since 1606: what would become of him after fourteen or fifteen years of journeys and work? 'I am well, my dear daughter,' he wrote to Baroness de Chantal on 2 October 'with such a huge amount of work and concerns that I cannot say more about. It is a small miracle that God is working, since every evening when I retire, I cannot move either body or mind so tired am I all over; and by morning I am more cheerful than ever. At the moment I have neither order, nor measure, nor reasonableness (it would be impossible for me to hide anything from you) but just the same, here I am, perfectly strong, thanks be to God.'

There were more than enough reasons for Francis de Sales to gain a reputation for holiness. All the more so since regularly the 'rudeness', criticisms, insolence, slander aimed at the devout bishop often ended up being turned against their authors. Not that he wasted any time refuting them, unless it was the honour of the Church or the priesthood that was at stake, but accepted them with kindness and patience; and generally everything ended up, for his part, with general and total forgiveness for the guilty.

3 Visitation d'Annecy Archives, *Recueil de circulaires*, vol. I, p. 573.

Then he would invent those phrases where the wound was hidden marvellously beneath his smile, phrases that were immediately taken up by the people.

One day a defamatory libel against Francis was spread around Annecy itself: the holy bishop was not disturbed by it, but since a Canon had read what was written, the Chapter took it up rigorously, 'and sentence would have been pronounced had not the good prelate (holy up to this point) lowered himself to the point of addressing requests to his Chapter that the sentence, already in writing, be suppressed and shelved. He did even more: some years later, in fact, he procured for the same man a very honourable position in accordance with his birth and circumstances, at the court of Their Most Serene Princes, without even in the least having been asked to do so, but of his own free will. So there was a very common proverb in Savoy, saying that one needed to offend Blessed Francis to receive any kind of benefit from him.'

This patience and habit of forgiveness did not appeal to everyone, and many saw it as a weakness if not a sin: 'Francis de Sales will certainly go to Heaven,' said the Prior of Talloires, after Francis had forgiven the monks who had tried to assassinate him, 'but as for the Bishop of Geneva, I don't know, since he never punishes.' It meant he did not understand the source of all these virtues. Under insult or slander, 'Francis felt' as he had confessed, 'boiling anger like water on fire,' but he restrained himself and calmed down, finding his joy in resembling Our Lord Jesus Christ, mocked and despised, and the Virgin Mary. 'My Mother,' he wrote on 13 December to Mother de Chantal who was upset about some slander, 'you do not need to be so tender on my behalf; we need to accept that they will censure me; if I don't deserve this one way I deserve it in another. The Mother of He who deserved eternal adoration said not a single word when they covered him with insults and ignominies... My dear Mother, we have much self-love if we want everyone to love us, and that everything redounds to our glory.'

Of course, most of the criticisms and even suspicions that Francis had to endure were caused by his 'business' affairs. But only God knows how much he tried to inform Rome precisely, or his Prince, on how he conducted himself. If we want to find a fine example of this, we need to re-read his letters to the Duke and to Clement VIII when seeking permission to preach during Lent in Dijon in 1604. But for his part, the Duke was too manipulative, too scheming to admit that the invitations to preach with which France and especially the Court and Paris, besieged the Bishop of Geneva, were due only to his eloquence or holiness. He smelled conspiracy and betrayal everywhere. On a number of occasions Charles Emmanuel refused Francis authorisation to accept these foreign proposals. He made him wait nine months for authorisation to preach in Paris. What could the bishop have been up to with the French?

It was undoubtedly after Francis' astonishing crossing through Geneva on 12 September 1609 that the Duke's suspicions reached the point of a paroxysm of rage. Certainly the escape was so spectacular that Charles Emmanuel was forced to become suspicious: in order not to miss an appointment set for him by the Baron de Lux, in which Francis would have discussed the restoration of three parishes in the district of Gex, seeing that he could not cross the Rhone swollen by the rains, he simply decided that he had to pass through Geneva. Of course it was no trivial matter: the Catholic bishop, in ecclesiastical dress, escorted by a patrol, crossing Calvin's city on horseback in broad daylight...

Recounting the adventure to his friend Antoine Favre on 21 September following, Francis told him the true version of this success: 'You would know that I crossed Geneva under the protection of my guardian angel.' But this supernatural explanation satisfied neither the Genevans nor the Duke... Francis had to wash himself, in the eyes of the latter, of suspicion of betrayal! Francis wrote to Monsieur des Hayes on 4 December 1609: 'People have argued thus: Whatever has he done to Gex and who gave him the

courage to pass through the city that is so much the enemy of the name he bears and of his quality, and into which his predecessors have never entered since the revolt – without a safe conduct, without disguise, without hiding his own identity? – But in reality they know little about my soul if they judge me to be so full of self-consideration and apprehension that I can't be a little rash. Time, my innocence, but above all divine providence will put all this right: however, regarding the matter, I have written to His Highness everything that it seemed to me good to say, after having come to know that he had indulged in some distrust in my regard... This is my news of State.'

In order to believe what Francis was saying, the Duke would have needed to have an innocence that was not his. His suspicions were revived by the least little occasions, and Francis had to forcefully reassure him on several occasions of his fidelity to the House of Savoy: 'Having been warned that I have been accused by Your Highness of having carried out certain ill-advised matters of State with foreigners,' he wrote on 12 June 1611 'I was extremely astonished, unable to imagine on what appearance of foundation such a slander could be constructed... I have carved too deeply in my heart the duty I bear (towards Your Highness) for me ever to allow myself to go and do something that could in any way harm the service of your interests; and I have too strong an aversion to the annoying matters of State to ever want to give them my deliberate attention.'

If Francis defended himself so firmly it was because the honour and interests of the diocese were at stake, and also the destiny and position of his relatives and friends. This clear strength – Sainte-Beuve would say: this boldness of the dove – is one of the least-known aspects of his personality; intrigue and slander saw that it would be revealed: it is the good side of these miseries. We also find this elevated thinking, attitude and tone in his correspondence whenever, through the bishop, insults touched on the Church, his

priests or his Daughters of the Visitation, or the justice due to any of his sheep. It was then that the daring, ironic, virulent polemicist was awakened in him whose humility and charity usually blunted such vivacity when it was only about him.

Thus these very ‘annoyances’ and setbacks were turned in Francis’ favour. Only a saint could conduct himself amid so much scheming with so much deliberation, wisdom, balance. The reputation for holiness went beyond the boundaries of Savoy. Francis’ journey to Franche-Comté in 1609, when he went there at the order of Paul V to settle the business of the Salines, was a triumph: at Dôle, then the capital, at Besançon, Baume-les-Dames, everywhere, people wanted to see him, hear him preach, go to confession to him, receive communion from him. They all called Francis ‘our bishop, as if he had practically been their pastor’.

When he went to Paris in 1618, another even greater success. Churches and monasteries competed for the grace to listen to him: it has been calculated that over nine months he preached a hundred and sixty five times; and since it seemed that his health was suffering, the people tried to obtain relics: in the monasteries the spoon, the knife he had used to eat, and even more the linen, the vestments he had used to celebrate Mass. Francis managed as best he could amid all these annoyances... At the very least he did not tolerate his friends taking part in this ‘concert’: ‘You are not writing according to (my wish),’ he wrote to Mme de Chantal on 25 November 1608 ‘nor when writing to my mother or to Mme de Charmoisy, when you say: “Our holy and good bishop”; in fact those women should be reading “foolish bishop” when they read “holy bishop”. I know well that at the time of Saint Jerome all bishops were called holy due to their role: now, however, this is no longer the custom.’ On 24 January 1608 he once again insisted: ‘You are forbidden to use the word holy when you speak about me since, my daughter, I am more knave than holy: and it is not the case that you should be canonising me.’



Anncy, *Maison Lambert*, first dwelling of Bishop Francis de Sales.

Francis' spiritual doctrine

One can certainly reject as excessive certain testimonies of the early 'Lives' of Francis de Sales by invoking their desire to be edifying or – which is the same thing – their absence of a critical spirit. But the mass of facts and documents is such that one cannot question the veneration that surrounded the Bishop of Geneva while he was alive.

What was this due to? Certainly, to the irradiation of his soul. But it would distort his spiritual portrait if his holiness were limited to his personal fidelity to God. His holiness was apostolic: he wanted all his flock to benefit from the graces granted to him; he wanted his own reform of life to become, as far as possible, the reform of all his people. Holiness – and by saying this I give the word all its weight of grace – concerned each of his 'sheep'.

It was the marvellous thing about his apostolate: Francis de Sales dared, if not to lead then at least to guide souls, all the souls that were entrusted to him – his people, his clergy, his monks and his sisters, his spiritual sons and daughters – towards the ideal of life that he had once conceived as the evangelical ideal. No one should be left out of this great movement: each according to their place, each according to their measure, their situation, their 'state', their attraction to grace, but all must have access, from near or far, to the 'Life of holy charity' about which he was secretly planning, since February 1607, to write the book that he described two years later in a letter to the Archbishop of Vienne in clearer terms: 'I am meditating on a book on the Love of God, not to deal with it speculatively, but to show its practice in the observance of the commandments of the first Tablet. It will be followed by another that shows the practice of the same divine love in the observance of the commandments of the second Tablet: both will be able to form a just and manageable volume.'

The strength of Francis de Sales as a bishop consisted in possessing from the outset a doctrine, not just theological but

spiritual, of Christian life, and in having received gifts from God as well as an exceptional grace for bringing souls to life. Sermons, writings, counsel, direction, everything in him turns to the heart, because for him religion is essentially a life, a life of the heart. 'God is the God of the human heart'; 'between this divine Goodness and our soul' there is 'great but secret convenience'. 'Although the state of our human nature is now not endowed with its original health and righteousness... and indeed we are greatly depraved by sin, nevertheless the holy inclination to love God above all things has remained with us, as also the supernatural light through which we recognise that his sovereign goodness is lovable above all things.'

This natural inclination 'does not inhabit our hearts in vain: since God uses it as a handle to more gently take hold of us and draw us to himself'. It is this that is already at work in the hearts of the unbelievers: "O Jesus, what delightful pleasure one feels in seeing the heavenly love that is the sun of virtues, when little by little, with progress that imperceptibly makes itself felt, it unfolds its clarity on a soul and does not stop before having completely covered it with the splendour of its presence, finally giving it the perfect beauty of its light! O how this dawn is cheerful, beautiful, kind and pleasing!'

Once we have expressed the act of faith required for our justification, nothing – other than our passions and our attachment to sin – stands in the way of divine love flourishing in us in all its fullness. Exceptional prayers and extraordinary phenomena are not essential to the life of charity: instead 'the union of the soul with its God' is achieved, in prayer as in action, through perfect conformity of our will with the will of God. The only authentic 'ecstasy' is the 'ecstasy and rapture of life and of working beyond oneself and one's natural inclinations... about which the great Apostle is speaking when he says: I live, but it is no longer I who live; it is Jesus Christ who lives in me'.

It is by starting from the most common truths of the faith and the clearest texts of the Gospel, therefore, that Francis de Sales

guides the soul towards deepest unity with God. 'I am preaching here, during this Advent', he wrote on 13 December 1619 'on the commandments of God, which they wanted to hear from me, and they are following me marvellously; for my part I preach with all my heart. Of this heart I will tell you, dearest Mother, that God in his infinite Goodness favours it a lot, giving it great love for the maxims of Christianity; and this, following the lights he gives me regarding their beauty and on the love that all the saints have for them in heaven, since I believe that up there they sing in such an incomparable way: Blessed are the poor in spirit, since there is the kingdom of heaven.' God, through creation, the Incarnation, the Redemption, has placed all his treasures within reach of the most humble: souls differ according to love. 'Love is the first and principal act of our devout or spiritual life, by means of which we live, feel and die: and our spiritual life is such as our affective movements are.' If, then, 'love is the life of our heart', if holiness does not depend on state, position, function, and even less on wealth, then married people can achieve it exactly as monks do, the child exactly like an adult, the ignorant, the coarse just like the theologian, the sick and infirm like the healthy.

And this is the problem that would increasingly impose itself on Francis de Sales's religious thinking – a problem that his apostolic contact with souls made more heartfelt every day: the 'life of holy charity' can be experienced in every state: it depends on the grace that God grants and on the generosity with which the soul corresponds with this divine invitation. 'May God touch and pluck wherever he wishes to, and on whatever string of our lute he chooses may he obtain only good harmony: Lord Jesus, without reserve, without *yes*, without *but*, without exception, without limits, may your will be done... in everything and everywhere...' 'I seem to see you', he wrote to Mme de Chantal in 1607 'with your vigorous heart that loves and loves strongly. I am so very grateful for this: because what good are those hearts that are half dead?

But we must do a particular exercise of wanting and loving God's will more vigorously, and I go even further: more tenderly, more lovingly than anything in the world.'

Since the chapter entitled 'Devotion is suitable to every Vocation and Profession' is found in the Introduction to the *Devout Life*, Francis de Sales' efforts to open up the sources of devotion to all souls is limited to this work. That means overlooking what he means by the word 'devotion': 'All true and living devotion... is neither more nor less than a very real love of God. The difference between love and devotion is just that which exists between fire and flame: love being a spiritual fire which becomes devotion when it is fanned into a flame. and what devotion adds to the fire of love is that flame which makes it eager, energetic and diligent, not merely in obeying God's Commandments, but in fulfilling His Divine Counsels and inspirations.' The difference between the dates of publication of the *Introduction* and the *Treatise on the Love of God* means nothing, nor does the difference of situation between Philothea and Theotimus. Does not the idea of the *Treatise* even predate that of the *Introduction*? In both, the same spiritual idea is formulated, as also in the *Sermons*, other books or planned books, and all the *Correspondence* of spiritual direction: Francis could have said to all souls what he wrote one day to Mother Angélique Arnauld: 'My heart... never ceases to formulate the wish for your advancement towards pure and courageous, but humble and sweet divine love': he wanted to introduce all souls to the 'eternal freedom of love'.

The episcopal duty to preach

'Ah, Monsignor, if people in our situation love God, they are always ready to speak of his love', Francis de Sales told Bishop

Jean Geoffroy Ginod, Bishop of Belley who, in 1603, shortly after his consecration, had him preach in his cathedral; and after the sermon ‘almost all that fine assembly (the Duke of Bellegarde was there with his court) went to confession to the Servant of God and at his Mass on Monday wanted to receive communion from his hand’. This simple anecdote could sum up all of Francis de Sales’ pastoral effort once he became Bishop of Geneva: preaching to lead souls, through confession, to a fervent Eucharistic life and union with God.

Preaching. Francis, who always loved preaching, had no difficulty making the Council of Trent’s commission his own: preaching is the most important duty of the bishop. On 3 June 1603, writing to M. de Revol who would very soon be consecrated bishop, he advised him: ‘You must absolutely make the resolution to preach to your people. The most holy Council of Trent, after all the preceding ones, determined that “the first and principal task of the bishop consists of preaching”’: and do not be carried away by any consideration that could distract you from this resolution. Do not do it to become a great preacher, but simply because you must do it and God wants it. The paternal sermon of a bishop is better than all the artifice of the elaborate sermons of preachers of other kinds. It takes little for a bishop to preach well, since his sermons should be necessary and useful, not curious or sought after; his words simple, not affected; his action paternal and natural, without art or care; and as brief as it may be or as little as he may say, it is always a lot.’ Note the date: 1603. Francis was at the beginnings of his episcopate.

A year later, on the other hand, he was offered an opportunity to clarify and develop his ideas. Bishop Frémyot, on the eve of his solemn entry into his city of Bourges, and who was afraid of ascending the pulpit his predecessor had done much honour to, asked Francis for some advice on preaching. On 5 October Francis, who was taking some rest at Sales, wrote a lengthy letter to him ‘letting the pen run, without worrying at all about words

or artifices.’ It was both a personal note and at the same time a masterpiece. We can leave aside what concerns the technical side of sacred eloquence – excellent though it may be – and consider just the apostolic aspect: ‘No one can preach unless he possesses three conditions: a good life, good doctrine, a legitimate mission.’ Regarding the mission, Francis notes that bishops have not only the mission, but they have the ‘ministerial wellspring’ of it. He insists on holiness of life and ends up advising: ‘Furthermore, you must never preach without having celebrated Mass or without wanting to celebrate it... It is certain that when Our Lord is really in us, he gives us clarity, since he *is the light*.’

After this preamble Francis poses the question: ‘So what is the aim of the preacher in the action of preaching?’ Then comes his magnificent reply: ‘His aim and his intention must be to do what Our Lord came to do in this world; and here is what he himself says: *I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly*. So the aim of the preacher consists of this, that sinners who have died in iniquity should live righteously, and that the righteous who have spiritual life may have it even more abundantly, becoming more and more perfect.’ The preacher’s models are the Apostles on the day of Pentecost: they teach and they move people. What should he preach? ‘The word of God... So is there no need to make use of Christian Doctors and the books of the saints? Yes, certainly. But the doctrine of the Fathers of the Church is none other than the explanation of the Gospel, the exposition of Scripture. There is the same relationship between the Holy Scripture and the teaching of the Fathers as there is between a whole almond and a crushed almond, whose kernel can be eaten by everyone... In truth, the passages of Scripture have first place and are the foundations of the building: since in the end we are preaching the word and our doctrine rests on authority. *Ipse dixit*...’

After having spoken at length about the method of presentation and composition, Francis comes to a point ‘wherein greater

attention is desired than elsewhere.’ It is the art of ‘speaking’: ‘How will we speak when we are preaching? We need to be wary of the *quamquams* and long sentences of the pedants, their gestures, grimaces, their movements: all this is the plague of preaching. What is needed is an action that is free, noble, generous, innocent, strong, holy, serious and somewhat slow. But what does one need to have this? In a word, to speak fondly and devoutly, simply and candidly, and trust; be truly captured by the doctrine you are teaching and about which you want to persuade people. The supreme artifice lies in not having any artifice. Our words must be set aflame not by shouts and unrestrained gestures but by inward affection; they must issue from our heart rather than from our mouth. We must speak well, heart speaks to heart and the tongue speaks only to men’s ears.’

This is how the advice of experience flows from his pen: ‘I like preaching that feels more about love of neighbour than of indignation, even towards the Huguenots who must be treated with great compassion, not flattering them but deploring them. Preaching is the publication and declaration of God’s will made for men by the one who is legitimately sent to instruct them and move them to serve his divine majesty in this world, so they can be saved in the next...’ Francis gives courage to the young bishop who is a bit timid: ‘Preach often... God wants it, people expect it; it is the glory of God, it is his salvation; boldly Sir, and courage, for the love of God... For love, nothing is impossible. Our Lord did not ask St Peter: are you wise or eloquent when he told him: *Pasce oves meas*; but: *Amas me*? To speak well it is enough to love well.’

One final advice before closing the letter: ‘Your people are waiting to see you and to be seen and seen again by you... Oh, how edified they will be when they see you often at the altar, sacrificing for their salvation, discussing their edification with their parish priests and in the pulpit speaking of the word of reconciliation, and preaching!’

There is the whole pastoral heart of Francis in this letter. It erases the astonishment we feel today reading what remains of the Sermons: how could these drafts, or even these elaborated texts whose dryness disconcerts us, attract crowds, shake up souls so deeply? It depends on the fact that we are missing what then gave them their power for the most part: the emotion, the warmth of the soul that had just finished praying, the tone of love. ‘The others (preachers)’ the Duchess of Montpensier said one day, ‘fly through the air, but this orator of holy love falls on his prey, reaches the heart and takes possession of it.’

The orator of holy love: these words marvellously characterise Francis’ gift of eloquence. This gift is a grace, sought and received in prayer. ‘I cannot speak of God without emotion’, he confided to a priest after a sermon. ‘I went cheerfully like a bird to my pulpit, where I sang more joyfully than usual in honour of our great God’, he wrote again to Mme de Chantal on 8 December 1617. For him every sermon was, in his own words, ‘a sermon of love’: he loved to preach in front of small, familiar listeners, where he had ‘every possibility of loosening the bridle of (their) poor and minute affections’.

After preaching the Lenten series at Dijon in 1604, when the city administrators presented him as a token of gratitude with a service of gilded silver pottery and a gold ring adorned with a beautiful sapphire, he kindly replied that ‘he was not selling the word of God and wanted to take away with him nothing except their hearts.’ Again it is St Vincent de Paul who would find the best words for describing Francis de Sales the preacher: he called him a ‘talking Gospel’.

Lenten series and catechism lessons

The most useful of these preaching opportunities for him were the Lenten series: both those he preached to his people, and those he was invited to preach in other dioceses. ‘You know well’, – he wrote to Mme de Chantal ‘that Lent is the harvest of souls... Lent is the autumn of the spiritual life where we gather the fruits and pile them up for the whole year.’

He had Lent as a primacy concept, a liturgical notion: in his eyes, Lent was par excellence the time for conversion of sinners and the sanctification of souls. ‘Preaching Lent wholly’ did not just mean going into the pulpit ‘many times’, giving five or six sermons on the same day: it also meant closing oneself in the confessional for long hours, welcoming one or other in personal conversations, instructing, teaching catechism, reconciling... Francis was afraid of Carnival, ‘this winter that leads to the flesh and makes souls weary, that... languishes hearts, that... produces this unfortunate rain of unworthy pleasures. Ah, may this time of flesh soon come to an end!’ But Carnival was followed by Lent. ‘Oh, come, come, favourable time; come, come, *days of salvation!*’ He prepared himself for these Lenten seasons through prayer and penance. When he could, he did not hesitate to also make a retreat: he did this in 1606. ‘Now are the days of my farewells since I need to leave tomorrow, before daybreak, to go to Chambéry where the Father Rector of the Jesuits (Fr Fournier) is waiting to receive me for these five or six days of Lent reserved for me to calm my poor mind torn by so many matters... There, my daughter, I propose to review myself completely, and to put all the pieces of my heart back in their place with the help of that good Father who is passionately interested in me and my good.’ And so he faced his audience with a heart filled with ‘a thousand good desires to serve divine love well’.

Let us open a brief parenthesis here: nothing resembles Francis de Sales’ Lenten series as much as another ministry he had very much

at heart, especially because the Council of Trent had prescribed it: catechism. He went to catechism sessions with the same mind as he did his Lenten series. In the winter of 1603, as bishop, he did not hesitate to begin this teaching of Christian doctrine himself to children at Annecy. First in the church of Notre-Dame, then moving on quickly to the church of Saint-Dominique. And many parents joined their children, along with many other adults 'who wanted to be instructed'. So 'he divided the people into three classes according to gender and age'.

Nothing better than these fragments of a letter to Mme de Chantal (11 February 1607), can reveal to us the understanding of the infant and popular soul with which Francis led these meetings: 'I really very much approve of your becoming a school teacher. God will be grateful for it given that he loves children; and, as I was saying the other day at catechism to encourage our women to look after the children, the children's angels love with particular love those who raise them in the fear of God and who instil devotion in their tender hearts.'

And now some grace and relaxation: 'I am arriving just now from doing catechism, where with our children we enjoyed making the audience laugh a little, making fun of the masks and dances; I was in a moment of good humour, and a large audience invited me with their applause to be a child with the children. They tell me it's something that suits me, and I believe it. May God make me truly childlike in innocence and simplicity!'

This ministry of catechism would always remain dear to Francis de Sales' heart: during the Lenten series and, as we will see, while visiting the parishes, he liked to gather the children and teach them simple doctrine. He used Bellarmine's catechism for this purpose: but if he found listeners too poorly educated to understand it, he made up his own questions and answers and distributed them to each one in handwritten leaflets. Undoubtedly it was from October 1603 that we have a very valuable fragment entitled: 'Rules for

teaching catechism', written for parish priests in the diocese. During his entire reign, Francis encouraged his priests' zeal on this point.

Visiting the diocese

One of the tasks that the Council of Trent recommended and almost imposed on bishops was the visitation of their diocese, one parish after another. It was a task that Francis both wanted and feared. 'I am off to make this blessed visit', he wrote to Baroness de Chantal 'where I see crosses of every kind everywhere. My flesh quivers but my heart adores them. Yes, I salute you, crosses small and large, spiritual or temporal, outward or inward; I salute and kiss your feet, unworthy of the honour of your shade.'⁴

This letter is from early October 1605: up to that point Francis had been 'detained' in Annecy 'by a number of burning issues' and by a health crisis. The fragility of his health was certainly one of the crosses looming in his path. Especially since he would travel on horseback or even on foot, if the terrain required it. The country was indeed harsh. In a letter of August 1606, Francis would speak of the 'frightening mountains (of Chamonix) all covered with ice ten or twelve shovels thick'. 'The diocese of Geneva', Charles-Auguste de Sales describes it 'is very large and populous, almost all topped by high mountains (except for Chablais, Gex, Ternier and a part of the Geneva and Savoy territory), with very difficult access, especially as regards the mountain parishes, and very different in temperature: in some places, in fact, winter is almost eternal, in others the heat is extreme: this is why the good bishop was very troubled.'

4 *Œuvres*, vol. XIII, p. 113. He would say the same at his departure in June 1606, cf. *ibid.*, p. 199.

He left, therefore, on 15 October 1605. Taking into account the necessary returns and sojourns back in Annecy, this visitation would last four years. In many places Francis found Protestants or the ruins they had left; joys then mingled with sorrows: sometimes he rejoiced at noting or receiving conversions; sometimes he was desolate when facing the hardening of souls and the thousand annoyances aroused by the ministers. In August, however, the sight of his Chablais consoled him: 'While (eleven years ago) I had found only a hundred Catholics, now I have not found a hundred Huguenots.' But the report he addressed to Pope Paul V on the state of the diocese (November 1606) was much less optimistic: one hundred and thirty parishes are 'partly under the tyrannical domination of Berne, partly under the government of the most Christian King'... 'As far as regards those occupied by the Bernese, there is nothing to hope for until the city of Berne itself is brought back to order.' As for the others, the King 'orders us to continue hoping... But my eyes begin to tire of waiting for his word and say: when will he console me?'

To the contrary, in the four hundred and fifty Catholic parishes, Francis found many consolations despite the problems; and the love of his people comforted him: 'My dear daughter,' he wrote to Mme de Chantal on 2 October 1606 'I have found a good people among these high mountains! What honour, what welcome, what veneration they have for their bishop! The day before yesterday I arrived in this small village (Bonneville) in the middle of the night; but the villagers had put out so many lamps and lanterns, as if for a feast day, that it looked like daytime. Oh! How they deserve a better bishop.'

Not even he, however, spared his time and his strength for the benefit of his people: 'He preached, he taught catechism, he did not fail to visit even the smallest chapel; he administered the sacrament of Confirmation, heard confessions and gave holy communion to his people from his own hands; he listened to everyone's complaints

RITVALE
SACRAMENTORVM
AD PRÆSCRIPTVM

SANCTÆ ROMANÆ

ECCLESIAE IVSSV REVERENDISSIMI

Patris Francisci de Sales Episcopi &
 Principis Gebennensis editum, ad
 vsum Ecclesiæ & Diocesis
 Gebennensis,

*IN QVO NON TANTVM RITVS,
 sed etiam canones ac regula sacramentorum ritè
 administrandorum, aliq, plurima documenta
 ad munus pastorale rectè obeundum,
 continentur.*



LVGDVNI,

Apud **IOANNEM CHARVET,**

1612.

Cum privilegio Regi.

Frontispiece of the *Rituale* published by Francis de Sales in 1612.

with great patience and prudently ordered what seemed necessary; he informed himself about the shortcomings of clerics and lay people, about public sins and sinners, and corrected when necessary with a severity very well mixed with his natural gentleness, etc. etc.’ Temporal administration, reconciliations, legal matters and disputes: he omitted nothing, so that after the visit, souls and all matters would be at peace. ‘Ultimately, it was the good shepherd and bishop who gave his soul for his sheep.’

However, when he returned from these trips, he had a great need for rest and spiritual recollection. ‘I arrived here on Saturday evening,’ he wrote on 30 November 1605 ‘after having beaten around the countryside for six weeks without stopping anywhere other than for half a day at most. Usually I preached every day and often twice a day. How good God is to me! I have never been so strong. All the crosses I had foreseen, when I faced them, turned into olives and palms; all that looked like gall to me turned out to be honey, or even less. Only that I can truthfully say that other than while on horseback or during some waking moments at night, I have not had time to think about myself and consider the state of my heart, so many have been the important concerns coming one after the other. I confirmed a considerable number of people.’

In this way, ever more intimate ties were woven between the bishop and his people⁵: the heart of the people was increasingly ‘enamoured’ of its bishop, and he said: ‘I feel enamoured of souls a little more than usual... Now the heart of my people is almost all mine.’ The fact that in the meantime, King Henry IV persisted in wanting to attract him to France, and prepare new honours, titles and roles for him – ‘There is talk of elevating me again.’ What ‘saddened’ Francis was the fact that they offered these changes to

5 One example among many: Francis’ vigorous reaction to a Cardinal when in 1608 some Savoyards were accused of reading heretical books. *Œuvres*, vol. XIV, pp. 42-43.

him 'in the name of the greater glory of God and in the service of the Church'. On the other hand, he did not hide the fact that he had 'a special leaning' towards France, 'in whose atmosphere he had been nurtured'. However, except for some formal order from the Pope, he preferred his dear Savoy: 'It is true that I am in my own country and amongst my own people, with a degree of ease that is sufficient for me, and what is dearest of all to me, with rest that is as good as my office can allow, and that for now seems to be secure enough.' Speaking of his diocese (a word that was feminine at the time), he said jokingly: 'My poor wife makes me feel sorry for her, and since I can only let her suffer a thousand problems and God wants me to cling to her, here I am garrotted!' Beneath the humour lies love, deep love.

8 – REFORM OF THE CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

Francis de Sales and his priests

Of all his people, one group drew the cream his concern: his priests. Although in the *Correspondence* that has been preserved, letters to simple clergy are rare (other than the letters to M. de Bérulle before his elevation to the cardinalate) and there is almost complete absence of letters to Savoyard priests, one should not conclude that his clergy aroused less interest in the Bishop of Geneva than his spiritual sons and daughters and the great personalities with whom he corresponded. The whole current of his thought and action goes against this opinion: Francis de Sales knew that in the reform of a diocese, the main thing was the conversion of the bishop, and that there was nothing more urgent than the sincere and profound conversion of the clergy.

During the years he had been ‘parish priest of Thonon’ – a parish priest without a church, presbytery or assistant! – he had seen from too close up, had experienced too much in his own sensitivity, in his flesh, what in fact pastoral life demanded in terms of zeal and grace from the priest, for him not to have wanted a fervent clergy. On the other hand, even on this point he made the directives of the Council of Trent his own: if the bishop has, *par excellence*, the mission to preach, the priests are the ‘brooks’ of this ‘ministerial wellspring’: the grace of episcopal consecration passes into the grace of priestly ordination. A casual comment illuminates Francis’ feelings concerning his priests: when writing to Bishop Frémyot: ‘Oh, how your people will be edified when they see you... discussing their edification with their parish priests.’ Clearly this sentence means that

the priest, and especially the parish priest, shares very closely in the mission of the bishop, and therefore in his vocation and grace.

Against this background, Francis was faced with the concrete problem of ensuring the quality of his clergy. He wanted the priest to be educated and have good morals: he knew from experience that the best allies of Calvinism were the ignorance and bad conduct of certain clerics. His zeal for his clergy was therefore first and foremost expressed in an effort to sanctify and educate them. It is a pity that the text we will now quote does not offer all the critical guarantees of authenticity, because it certainly expresses the thinking of Francis de Sales: 'Good pastors are no less essential than good bishops, and bishops work in vain if they do not bother to provide their parish churches with devout pastors of exemplary life and sufficient doctrine, for it is the immediate pastors who must walk before the sheep, teach them the path to heaven and give them the example they must follow.

Experience has led me to understand that the people easily practise the exercises of devotion when they have clerics who, with the word of God and good example, encourage them to flee vice and embrace virtue; while on the other hand, the people very easily abandon the practice of Christian virtues when their priests are ignorant, care little about the salvation of souls and have bad habits.¹ Not that there were not many 'very recommendable' clerics in the diocese, but Francis would have wanted all of them, not just many, to be such.

For the reform of the clergy, Francis de Sales based himself on some unchanging principles, firmly pursuing their implementation.

Especially by setting up a seminary, for the instruction and formation of the many candidates presenting for orders each year: the spiritual destiny of the diocese depended on the spiritual worth of the seminary. Hence the paradox: candidates were abundant at the time in the Bishop of Geneva's diocese, while the clergy as

1 Cf. *Œuvres*, vol. XXIII, pp. 400-401.

a whole was mediocre. In less than two years – 1605 and 1606 – Francis gave the tonsure to more than five hundred and seventy young men during his visits. The archives indicate that in the twenty years of his episcopate he ordained around nine hundred priests – on average more than forty a year. So there was no lack of candidates: however, he needed to form them.

Francis often returned to this urgent matter: one document marvellously sums up his thinking, the 1606 report on the state of the diocese of Geneva. ‘No diocese in the Christian world has greater need than that of Geneva for a seminary for its clerics. Nevertheless, up till now we have worked in vain to erect one. In fact the episcopal stipend is too meagre to take something from it; the Chapter stipend is very poor and insufficient for feeding the canons, and it is the same for the other collegial churches. As for abbeys and priories, as wealthy as they may be, nothing at all can be obtained from them, since those that have them hold them tight, and most often these benefices are bled dry by the various taxes imposed on them. However, if the Apostolic See, in its supreme authority, wishes to allocate some rural priories to the erection of the seminary, as soon as they become vacant, matters would certainly end well. However, it is absolutely necessary that this be done, either in this way or with a general contribution from the clergy.’ Right up to the end of his life Francis would fight fiercely to realise his wish. He would not succeed, but his successors would reap the benefits of his tenacity.

After his episcopal consecration, Francis de Sales did not wait long before coming into contact with his clergy. Already on 11 August 1603 he called ‘all the clerics of the diocese’ to come together in a synod to be held in Annecy on 2 October. The archives have preserved for us a number of Constitutions or Ordinances of the synods Francis held with his clergy during his episcopate: these juridical texts are obviously austere, but they reveal how much Francis was concerned about making all his priests men who were educated and with good

morals. One article in the Ordinances of 1617 is characteristic of this tenacious and patient effort: 'those who from now on want to be promoted to Holy Orders... must practise the orders they have now and bring a written certificate of the fact from their parish priests, likewise regarding their age and good morals; in this matter the parish priests are exhorted and implored, by the eternal Judge, to be very conscientious and sincere.'

But among the acts of his episcopal administration, other documents – even more than the synodal texts – reveal his pastoral concern for his priests. In the first instance the regulations for teaching catechism that we have already mentioned. Then the *Memorial for confessors*, in which Francis places his lengthy personal experience of the confessional at the disposal of all his priests: 'Remember that the poor penitents call you *Father* and that in reality you must have a fatherly heart in their regard, patiently putting up with their rustic manners, ignorance, lack of intelligence, tardiness and other imperfections, never tiring to help and support them so long as there is some hope of amendment in them. The pastors are not in charge of strong souls but weak and feeble ones'...

He then describes the apostolic attitudes of the priest in this properly divine ministry: 'May your conscience be very clear and pure... Have a keen desire for the salvation of souls... Have the prudence of a doctor... Above all be charitable and discrete... When you meet people who, because of very serious sins... are excessively afraid and troubled in conscience, you must raise them up and console them with all means, Assuring them of the great mercy of God who is infinitely greater in forgiving them than all the sins of the whole world in damning them: and promise to help them in all their needs for the salvation of their souls'... 'The touchstone of a perfect confessor' he says in another fragment, 'consist in having pity on the vices of others and in being merciless on his own.'

Nor did he delay in compiling another significant document for his priests, an 'exhortation to apply themselves to study': 'Learning'

Francis dared say 'is the eighth sacrament of the Church's hierarchy... Ignorance is worse than malice... This is how our miserable Geneva surprised us: seeing that we were idle, not on our guard and that we were happy with simply saying our breviary, without thinking of becoming wiser, they deceived the simplicity of our fathers and those who came before them, making them believe that up until then they understood nothing of Holy Scripture.'

In this way the Bishop of Geneva had his reform 'slip' into the mind and heart of his priests, so that he could bring about the reform of the whole diocese through them.

Another initiative was also very close to his heart, and he hoped that it would be a source of life and missionary zeal for his priests: the *Holy House* at Thonon, or more precisely its 'presbytery', meaning the group of seven priests, who under the authority of a prefect, directed and animated the works of the Holy House. Let us immediately say that while some of these works, following Francis's death, saw real success, the Holy House, while he was alive, brought him nothing but trials and tribulations. The almost total lack of financial resources prevented the institution from flourishing: it just got by rather than being alive; and right up to the end Francis had to beg or even demand help for it. Yet he placed so much of his hopes on that presbytery! Maybe he saw in it a formula for a priestly community, a missionary centre that one day or other could serve as a model of a 'secular collegiate' for the parishes of the diocese? It was perhaps too good a dream and too premature. But it is interesting to see an attempt to adapt the life of a group of priests to the missionary task entrusted to them at that time.

Reform of the abbeys

Cursed money! When Francis visited his diocese, he ran into this problem everywhere. Among his parish priests and assistant



Jeanne-Françoise Frémont de Chantal
(portrait in the *Maison de la Galerie*).

priests he found many who were 'highly recommendable'. But how many of those he could have written about as he did to Bishop Riccardi about one priest in 1600: 'He endures great poverty and is almost starving', or again: 'We have no way of procuring for these men of merit an accommodation suited to their circumstances and office'. Yet money was not lacking in Savoy, even taking Protestant plundering into account...

Here we touch on one of the most delicate points in Francis de Sales' episcopate. Let us tackle it with the same frankness he used in his 1606 report. 'The tithes that are introduced every year', he said to Paul V 'would be sufficient to maintain (parishes and pastors). But see what prevents it: almost always, the tithes from the places in question belong to abbots and monasteries.'

In the following completely juridical text, Francis recounts this fact: 'I saw with my own eyes and visited a parish church situated on a very high mountain, where nobody can get to except by climbing with their hands and feet, and six Italian miles [about 9 km] from the nearest church. Now, the one and only parish priest administered the two churches there and celebrated Mass on feast days in one or the other, I do not need to say at the cost of what effort, what danger, how many inconveniences, especially in winter when everything in those places is covered with ice and snow. As soon as the men and women of the village arrived, from the first to the last they exclaimed: How come we respect all ecclesiastical rights, we pay tithes and first fruits and we are not granted a parish priest?... In fact, everything was taken by the nearest abbot.'

If at least those abbeys and monasteries would carry out the 'work' for which they had initially been founded! Alas! Francis de Sales, who very much respected religious vows and received many 'letters of affiliation' from Generals of Orders (Carthusians, Dominicans, Barnabites, Capuchins, etc.) whereby he shared in the merits and good works of these great religious families, he who had worked to introduce the Carmelites of St Teresa of Avila to France

and founded the Visitation, was forced to proclaim the terrible laxity of many Savoyard monasteries and take extremely severe measures concerning them. His correspondence bears ample traces of his sadness at this decadence of those who should have been, in the bosom of the Christian people, hearths of holiness, poverty, charity. Francis measures the harm done to the Church of God by such a state of affairs.

In the letter that he addressed to Nuncio Tolosa at the end of 1603, he wrote these very severe lines: 'It is certain that the laxity of all the monasteries of Savoy, except those of the Carthusians,² is so inveterate than an ordinary remedy would not be enough to heal them.

'To succeed it needs a reformer of great authority and prudence, furnished with broad powers to be used as needed; they should not only be very broad but absolute and without appeal, because the monks are very expert and capable at quibbling. And to prevent them from having any way of avoiding reform, it would need His Serene Highness to have the Senate of Savoy intervene in this matter, since without this intervention nothing will be gained.'

In his report to Paul V in November 1606, Francis reserved pride of place to this serious difficulty. 'It is surprising to see the extent to which regular discipline is ruined everywhere in the abbeys and priories of this diocese (I make an exception for the Carthusians and Mendicants). In all the others, *silver has turned into slag and the wine has been mixed with water, or worse still has turned into poison. This is how they make the enemies of God blaspheme, who say every day: And wherever is the God of this people?...* The gates of the Cistercian sisters' monasteries are open to all, for the sisters to leave and the men to enter.'

2 Francis makes an exception also for 'Mendicants', that is, the Capuchins: cf. *Œuvres*, vol. XXIII, p. 325.

In the same document Francis proposes remedies for these evils: 'This evil can be remedied, either by sending better people taken from other Orders, by making annual visits and employing coercive means, or finally by replacing monks with canons regular.' However, the spiritual man then appears beneath the jurist: 'The second (remedy) is very difficult and uncertain, since what is achieved by force is almost non-existent.' An investigation could be made of Francis de Sales the reformer of abbeys and monasteries: and he would be found no less great or spiritual in this enterprise also: if we were to do this study, the mere history of the reform of the Benedictine Priory at Talloires would make an enlightening chapter...

These difficulties strongly influenced Francis de Sales' religious thinking: could one be a monk and 'keep only the habit of the monk'? Was not such a contemplative and austere Rule as that of the Cistercians a protection against laxity? Were religious vows, cloister, superiors not enough to ensure holiness? Could one be of God and alienate souls from God?... So where did the secret to the true devout life lie?

Friend of souls and the 'Introduction to the Devout Life'

Now by contrast, his contacts with his people proved to him that there are – both among humble people and those of high rank – some 'very beautiful souls' who, through their simple daily life, cling to God and radiate charity. He had seen this at the time of his youth, including among family members. He had come to know of it through his long stints in the confessional. He had met them in Paris in Madame Acarie's circle, including Madame Acarie herself. He had met them even at the heart of heretical Geneva, such as the amazing hotel maid, Jacqueline Coste, who would be the first

*tourière*³ or sister at the monastery gate, at the Visitation monastery. And finally he saw many of them hidden away in the humblest villages when he was visiting them. After the visit in 1606 he wrote beautifully that ‘I met God full of gentleness and sweetness among our highest and harshest mountains, where many simple souls loved him and adored him in all truth and sincerity, and the roe deer and chamois ran hither and thither amid the fearful ice proclaiming his praises.’ One day he apologised to a woman of the aristocracy who was impatiently waiting for him to finish a conversation with a woman of the people: ‘My daughter, I love these poor peasant women so much: there are such good souls here, so simple, so filled with the fear of God!’ Even among prisoners – some of whom asked Francis to accompany them in their final ordeal – he sometimes discovered perfect love...

It was during these experiences that the sense, the delight he took in spiritual direction developed, something that was already innate in him, Head to head – heart to heart – with a soul, Francis felt fully himself. He certainly had the gift of attracting and encouraging genuine holiness; but these intimate, spiritual contacts were the ones he sought first of all as an essential means for each soul to access, in accordance with their personal grace, the ‘perfection of pure love.’ And it was not only male and female religious that he wanted to be ‘spiritually assisted’. It seems that the following surprising notice was addressed to all his parish priests (1604?): ‘To confessors and directors, for discerning the operations of the Spirit of God in souls from those of the evil spirit.’ At any rate, it is in this notice that we find the secret of his personal way of dealing with souls. ‘The surest sign of love is when it is founded on a true and profound humility and an ardent charity’; or again, this golden rule: ‘It is an effect of the happy guidance of the Father of Lights, to

3 The *tourière* or, in Italian, the *suora di ruota*, (think of a turntable), would be the point of contact with and for the outside world.

inspire (the soul) with inner feelings, (to) flow softly into the soul, and to descend there *like rain on the fleece*.’

He would use no other principles in that admirable spiritual correspondence that, as abundant as it is, is but a tenth of the letters he wrote. And what is the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, if not a collection of spiritual ‘memoirs’, an echo of the lengthy and numerous conversations Francis had with Mme de Charmoisy? We know how the book came about. In 1608 Madame de Charmoisy had to spend a few months in Chambéry for various tasks; Francis de Sales, who had been directing her for some time, advised her to go to Fr Fournier during this sojourn. Thus it was that the priest came to know about the ‘written memoirs’ that Francis had left for his penitent. Fr Fournier was enthusiastic about them and asked Francis that ‘the treasure of devotion of Madame de Charmoisy be printed.’

The good bishop agreed, trusting the judgement of this ‘great, learned and devout religious’. Undoubtedly he ‘hurriedly’ reviewed the text and ‘adjusted it’ with some minor ‘layout’ before giving it to the printer; but he was telling the truth when he wrote to the Bishop of Vienne: ‘You will have noted, Monsignor, that this work was never done according to some design or plan. It is a ‘memorial’ that I had written for a beautiful soul who sought my direction: and this during the concerns of a Lent during which I was preaching twice a week.’

This is the *Introduction*, connected with Francis de Sales’ habitual form of spiritual direction and reflects his familiar conversations; the letter clearly confirms this: ‘The Very Reverend Bishop of Montpellier warned me that sometimes I am too hasty and concise, and that I do not give sufficient body to my advice. And without doubt I see that he is right about this; but having written this work only for a soul whom I saw often, I was brief in writing given that it was possible for me to speak at length. He also told me something else, and that is that for a simple and first introduction, I take my

Philothea too far; this happened because the soul with whom I was dealing was already very virtuous, even though she had no practice in the devout life: hence the reason why she advanced much in a short time.' There is no 'theory' in this book: it is a collection of experiences. In order not to take it the wrong way, one needs to see it in the context of all the spiritual correspondence and also everything we know about Francis de Sales' direction.

On the other hand, the *Correspondence* poses a specifically Salesian problem: that of spiritual friendship. When we talk about Salesian friendship, we seem to be referring only to the feeling that bound Francis de Sales to Madame de Chantal and to some other very devout individuals. This would unduly narrow the field. In fact, for Francis de Sales, friendship was the normal, I was about to say essential atmosphere for a spiritual direction worthy of the name to be achieved. Friendship envelops spiritual direction and even goes beyond it. And here is what clearly defines its nature: there is no friendship unless it is spiritual; friendship is the communication of lights, holy desires, graces between two souls who both aspire to the perfection of divine love and who help each other in this search.

I will give only two examples but they are sufficient. First of all Antoine Favre: who could say which of the two was the 'director' for the other, the senator or the provost? They really had everything in common. Antoine was the confidant of Francis' plans and the first to attempt their realisation. Francis collaborated with Antoine's works, for example the Codex that bears his name. Francis gave advice to Antoine, but he often asked the latter's advice too; thus, during the time of the Chablais, he deferred to him to judge whether he should remain in Thonon, or even publish his *Controverses*. Together, in the winter of 1606–1607, the two friends began the *Florimontane Academy*. In some ways it was the extension, for all the educated elite of Annecy and even of Savoy, of what had been the fervour of their youthful correspondence and the charm of their familiar conversations among themselves in the Hôtel du Clos de Cran in

Annecy: the sharing of all their culture and virtue. ‘The aim of the Academy will consist in the exercise of all virtues, the sovereign glory of God, the service of the most Serene Princes and public usefulness’: this is how the statutes began. It was their friendship that sustained the Florimontane Academy and gave it the soul it had. In 1610, when Antoine Favre was promoted to President of the Sovereign Senate, he left Annecy for Chambéry and this brilliant institution faded. The correspondence between Francis and Antoine would then often be a businesslike correspondence between a bishop and president of the Senate, but the friendship lasted: ‘It seems to me that our friendship is boundless and that being so strongly naturalised in my heart, it is as old as he is.’ On the other hand, a new bond was woven between the two friends in 1610: ‘Mademoiselle Favre’ Francis wrote to Madame de Chantal



Annecy, chapel in the *Maison de la Galerie*.

on 5 February 'has finally decided, with her father's permission, to be completely of the Lord and to remain more than ever my daughter, and I believe that we will make something good of it'; at Pentecost in 1610 Marie-Jacqueline entered the Galerie House, along with Madame de Chantal and Mademoiselle de Bréchar. On that day the friendship between Francis de Sales and Antoine Favre acquired its full significance.

When we speak of Francis de Sales' friendships, the first name that comes to mind is that of Mme de Chantal. And rightly so: it is enough to open the *Correspondence* to fully grasp the evidence of a privileged, total, respectful and strong attachment, the tone of which, furthermore, including its most tender expressions, is even more paternal than it is friendly. 'I know that you have complete and perfect trust in my affection' he wrote to her, for example, on 24 June 1604... 'Also know, and believe it profoundly, that I have a keen and extraordinary desire to serve your spirit with all my strength. I would not know how to explain to you either the quality or the greatness of this affection that I bear in the service of your soul; but I will tell you that I believe it comes from God and that therefore I will nourish it dearly, and that every day I see it grow and increase considerably... I am all yours... God has given me to you: consider me yours in him.'

But it is worth noting how, from its origin, this friendship was placed at the level of the 'perfection of divine love'. First of all, it is God who desired it: in a wonderful way he prepared the encounter between Francis and Madame de Chantal at Dijon; he even revealed it to both in advance; but above all: '(the choice you have made for me to be your spiritual father) has all the marks of a good and legitimate choice', Francis wrote to the Baroness on 14 October 1604. 'This important movement of the mind that led you to do so almost by chance and with consolation; the consideration with which I examined the matter before agreeing; the fact that neither you nor I trusted ourselves but that we asked your good, learned and prudent

confessor; the fact that we gave the first stirrings of your conscience time to cool down when they might have been badly founded; the fact that everything was preceded by prayers, not for a day or two but for some months – all these are certainly infallible signs that it was the will of God.’

From the very first letters, Francis endeavoured to give this friendship its clearly spiritual character, and immediately established their relationship in the holy freedom of pure love: ‘I have never thought that there would be any bond between us that might lead to any obligation other than that of charity and true Christian friendship whose bond St Paul called a *bond of perfection*. Here is our bond, here are our chains, which the tighter they are the more they will give us joy and freedom.’

A year later, on 1 August 1605, he wrote once more to Mme de Chantal in these decisive terms ‘I will tell you nothing of the magnitude of my feelings towards you, but will assure you that they go well beyond any comparison: and this affection is whiter than snow, purer than the sun: this is why I left the reins free during this absence, allowing things to proceed as you wished. Oh, Lord God, it is not possible to say what consolation we will feel in Heaven diving into that sea of love, since its streams give us so much.’

We will not follow the evolution of this holy love through all its stages that would one day result in the foundation of the order of the Visitation of Holy Mary. ‘I greet the dear daughters that are with you,’ Francis would write to Mme de Chantal some days after the ceremony. ‘They are my sweet loves in Jesus Christ and you, my dear daughter, are truly my own heart in Him who, in order to have ours, presents his heart to you openly... Now I look upon our Congregation with such intensity that I am there with you night and day.’ In the same note, Francis ‘gave reason’ to his correspondent for the manner in which he made this meditation... Between the two there was love and freedom, everything was an exchange of God’s gifts.

The Visitation of Holy Mary and the ‘Treatise on the Love of God’

By founding the Visitation of Holy Mary, Francis not only added a new Congregation to already existing Orders, but brought about a new kind of religious life, the original kind that his spiritual experience, his reflection, contacts with souls had led him to conceive as an expression of life consecrated to God. ‘The strictest cloisters in the world do not result in souls united to God’. Not the greatest austerities and suffering, nor the strictest observation, nor high contemplation, not even the most extraordinary ecstasies: only the love of Jesus Christ. The Visitation? For Francis de Sales, this was the true reformed monastery: all the external features of religious life are nothing unless the human heart is filled with the love of Jesus Christ.

To define what the spirit of the Visitation of Holy Mary consists of, only the Visitandines have competence and authority: to understand the Rule of an Order in depth it is necessary to live this Rule from within. The task of the historian is different, and consists of collecting and interpreting, as well as possible, the documents that preceded or accompanied the foundation. In this case, the task is immense and exciting, since Francis de Sales developed his project as a Religious Congregation following his personal experience, according to the events through which God’s will was manifested.

It all began in Dijon, so it seems, through an inspiration that came to him. ‘Our Congregation’ he wrote on 24 May 1610 to Jesuit Nicolas Polliens, ‘is the result of the journey to Dijon, so it has never been possible for me to see things from a natural perspective; and my soul was secretly forced to penetrate another success that so directly concerned the service of souls that I preferred to expose myself to the opinion and mercy of the good rather than the cruelty of the slander of the wicked.’ He is talking about the time he spent in Dijon in 1604, and the Lenten sermons he preached in the *Sainte Chapelle* of the ducal palace and the first encounter with Baroness de Chantal...

However, there were numerous and difficult stages to overcome before the project could be realised! Francis would keep his plan secret for three years, would reflect and pray. He would not speak about it to Madame de Chantal either during the conversation at Saint-Claude in August 1604 or even during the retreat she made at Sales under his direction in May 1605. Only in June 1607, when she went to see him in Annecy, did he reveal his plan to her. Up until that moment he had not wanted to approve, and even less encourage, the desire the Baroness had shown to renounce the world: 'I will think about it a lot and I will hear many Masses to obtain enlightenment from the Holy Spirit,' he told her again on 11 February 1607 'because you see, my daughter, we are talking about a serious undertaking that that must be weighed with the weight of the sanctuary.'

It was in May that Mme de Chantal's journey was decided; in June she went to Annecy, and during her stay there, on 4 June, the Monday after Pentecost, Francis told her 'what he had chosen for her'. On 2 July, 'on the octave of her departure', he wrote to her: 'For my part, I feel (this choice) ever firmer in my soul; and since, after so many considerations, prayers and sacrifices, we have made our resolutions, do not allow your heart to apply itself to other desires; but blessing God for the excellence of other vocations, stop humbly at this one which is lower and less worthy, but more proper to your satisfaction and more worthy of your lowness. Remain simply in this resolution, without looking to the right or to the left.'

On the other hand, the project was not lacking in boldness and required great trust in God: 'I see great difficulties in carrying it out,' Francis confessed at first 'and I do not see how they can be overcome; but I am sure that divine Providence will do so with means unknown to creatures.' Three years later, on the Feast of the Trinity 1610, on 6 June, Madame de Chantal, Charlotte de Brécard and Jacqueline Favre were introduced to the *Galerie* by the Bishop

of Geneva; Jacqueline Coste, the maid, was there to wait on them; the Visitation of Holy Mary was born. A year later, on the feast of St Claude, 1611, Mother de Chantal and Sisters de Brécharde and Favre made their 'oblation' and the bishop gave them the veil.

But the Constitutions of the new Congregation had not yet been written. Several 'essays' from those years 1610–1611 were turned into an actual draft towards July–September 1613. But regarding the foundation at Lyons, a controversy arose between Archbishop de Marquemont and Francis de Sales; on 2 February 1616 Francis acquiesced to the Visitation being transformed into a Religious Order, into 'formal religion', in his own words. He revised the Rules to adapt them to the new canonical requirements. The manuscript was ready between August 1616 and January 1617. Finally, in July 1618, Francis received the brief from Rome that erected the Visitation as a Religious Order. On 16 October he turned the House at Annecy into a 'monastery under the Rule of St Augustine'... More than fourteen years had passed since God had inspired Francis in Dijon to found a Congregation!

To be sure to understand what Francis de Sales intended by founding the Visitation of Holy Mary, it is good to proceed with extreme caution. All his religious and apostolic thinking from 1604–1618 went into this project, and it is this that we need to reconstitute. First of all we need to follow his correspondence letter by letter – not just the exchanges with Baroness de Chantal or with the first Visitandines such as Charlotte de Brécharde or Jacqueline Favre; but also those he exchanged with 'lay and secular' souls eager for perfection. We also need to analyse, one document after the other, the dossier of the Constitutions and those of the other foundations. And even that would not be enough: it would be essential to delve deeper into the workings of grace in the souls of the first sisters and in Francis himself, and to compare all this data with the slow drafting of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. All of this influenced the development of the Visitation of Holy Mary, as



Anney, the second Visitation
(inside garden).

also the bishop's missionary activity in his diocese and outside his diocese. The *Spiritual Conferences* are testimony to this... A study of this kind would go beyond the limitations of this book. We limit ourselves here to some notes which seem to us to be essential.

One fact seems to be of paramount importance: the Visitation of Holy Mary is directly linked to – one could say that it is the ideal realisation of – what is highest in Francis de Sales' spiritual doctrine. We have seen that at its peak this was pure love, and to access this pure love we find perfect self-denial, the total annihilation of self-love. When defining 'the purpose for which this Congregation was established' in the Constitutions, Francis de Sales clearly indicates that with this foundation he intends to allow people, all people, whatever their age and state of health, 'there to seek the perfection of divine love': 'This Congregation was erected in such a way that no great severity may prevent the weak and infirm from being part of it, in order to seek the perfection of divine love.' Therefore, people 'of good and strong constitution' may enter; but also 'widows', so long as they have adequately 'provided for their own things' and in particular for the care of their children; and above all people 'who because of age or some bodily (infirmity) cannot enter more austere monasteries'.

This latter sentence is important, since it created a new criterion of attitude to religious life. What was required of postulants was no longer health of body in order to follow an austere Rule without failing, but 'a healthy spirit willing to live in profound humility, obedience, simplicity, sweetness and resignation'. Francis would write to Mother de Chantal in 1619, concerning a crippled candidate: 'I will forever believe that we should not refuse entry into the Congregation to infirm postulants, so long as we are not talking about the infirmities indicated in the Rule, that are not the case for (this) girl who cannot use her legs. In fact, without legs it is possible to do all the essential exercises of the Rule: obey, pray, sing, observe the silence, sew, eat and above all be patient with the

sisters who carry her around when they are not ready and prompt with their charity... I see nothing that would prevent her from being received unless her heart is crippled.'

If Francis de Sales so clearly eliminated 'austere austerity' from the Constitutions, he did so because he demanded that 'the fervour of charity and the strength of a very intimate devotion make up for all this' and that this required of the soul an extremely vital union with God. Francis had the same idea as St Paul about spiritual strength and weakness: '*Cum infirmior, tunc potens sum*'. Love and humility go hand in hand, they call upon each other: 'Seeing your Congregation small in number at the beginning,' he wrote in the Preface to the Constitutions 'yet great in its desire to perfect itself ever more in the most holy love of God and in denial of any other love, I was forced to assist it with care, reminding myself well that Our Lord, as he himself said, came into this world for the good of his sheep, not just that they might have the true life, but also that they may have it more abundantly.' In the *Book of Vows*, on 6 June 1611 the day of the first three Mothers' oblation, he wrote: 'The humble glory of the Sisters of the Congregation. We have no other bond than the bond of charity *which is the bond of perfection. The charity of Jesus Christ urges us*.'

Such a concept of religious life demanded that people who dedicated themselves to it receive a solid and deep spiritual formation sustained by a living faith. True devotion presumes great strength of soul. And this strength of soul is only gained through the daily struggle. Francis de Sales knew this. It is no coincidence that he insisted with Baroness de Chantal in 1607 on regular reading of the *Spiritual Combat*, a book by Scupoli 'that is my dearest book and that I have carried in my pocket for at least eighteen years, and have never read it without benefit; in fact, the virtue of strength and the strength of virtue are never acquired in peace.'

He spared neither time nor concern to form the soul of Madame de Chantal and that of the first sisters, even before they entered

religion. He thought that the stability and durability of the entire building depended on the solidity of these cornerstones. In an extremely interesting document – that undoubtedly needs to be dated in September-December 1614 – *Preface for the instruction of devout souls on the dignity, antiquity, usefulness and variety of the Congregations or Colleges of Women and Girls who dedicate themselves to God* – he arrives at this observation: ‘There is no kind of life in the world in which inconveniences do not occur: solitude or conversation (he means community life), learning or ignorance, frequent changes of superiors or the fact of “having them in perpetuity”, visits from Generals or continually residing in a city, poverty or the certainty of having resources: they all have advantages, they all have risks for spiritual life...’ ‘In winter the bees, observing strict enclosure, are subject to rebelling and killing each other; but in summer when they fly out, they run the risk of getting lost.’

What does the safeguarding of religious souls consist of? ‘If the spirit of devotion reigns in Congregations, a mediocre cloister will be sufficient to create good servants of God there; if it does not reign there, the strictest cloister will serve for nothing. Now, the spirit of piety will always reign there if the superiors apply themselves to it with the paternal care they must have.’ That Mother de Chantal had had the inspiration to take the ‘vow of most excellent perfection’ and had been authorised to do so by Francis de Sales on 27 December 1611, was important not only for the soul of the foundress, but for the whole foundation.

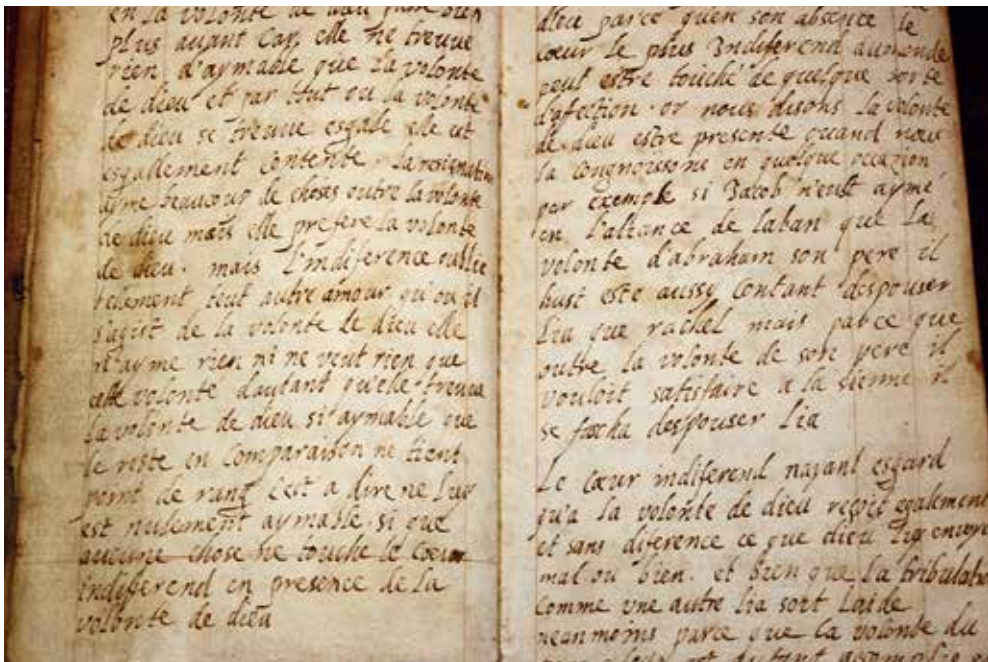
In this spiritual education, Francis grants the human heart a place of primary importance, places it at the centre, studies its movements, inclinations and repugnances, generosity and moments of lukewarmness. For him, the heart is the place of love, the place of renunciation and self-denial: ‘We hope’, Francis wrote to Mother de Chantal ‘that the Holy Spirit will fill us one day with his holy love; and while waiting we perpetually hope and make

room for that sacred fire, emptying our hearts of ourselves as much as possible. How happy we will be, my dearest Mother, if one day we can exchange ourselves for that love which, by making us one, will completely empty us of all multiplicity, so as to only have in our hearts the sovereign unity of the Most Holy Trinity, which is blessed, forever and ever. Amen!

Francis was so concerned with engaging, I was about to say committing, the human heart to 'devotion' and the life of perfection that he wanted it inscribed in the symbol on the Visitation coat of arms. A note of 10 June 1611 simply describes how he had the inspiration for this. That morning he was unable to celebrate Mass at the *Galerie* and sent along M. Rolland. But, as he told Mother de Chantal, 'he is not a messenger skilful enough for me to entrust him with the thought that God sent me last night: and that is that our House of the Visitation is, through his grace, noble and considerable enough to have its own coat of arms, its *blaison*, its livery. So I thought, dear Mother, if you are in agreement, that we should take as our coat of arms a single heart pierced by two arrows enclosed within a crown of thorns: in this poor heart will be incorporated a cross that will surmount it, and the sacred names of Jesus and Mary will be imprinted on it.' And then comes the mystical explanation of this symbol: 'Our Congregation is truly the work of the heart of Jesus and Mary. The Saviour, by dying, gave birth to us by opening his sacred heart; it is therefore only right that through careful mortification, our heart always be surrounded by the crown of thorns that was on the head of our Chief, when love held him bound to the throne of his mortal sorrows.' According to Francis de Sales, love and self-denial are explained and justified only in reference to the love of Jesus crucified. His religion begins with the heart and goes to the heart.

What is surprising is the fact that this ideal is not only symbolised by the 'coat of arms' of the Congregation, but is also, so to speak, inscribed in its history. We will not recount here the controversy

between the Archbishop of Lyons, Archbishop de Marquemont, and Francis de Sales, following which the Visitation became an enclosed Order. We will merely recall the magnificent reply that Francis addressed to the archbishop on 2 February 1616. It is an item in which every nuance needs to be carefully weighed! How well it fits with Salesian spirituality! Francis does not hide the fact that the suppression of ‘visiting the sick’ made obligatory by perpetual enclosure was a sacrifice for him and also, in his opinion, a spiritual loss. But with magnificent and elevated insight he recognises that what is essential to religious life does not lie there; and since ‘by transforming the Congregation of the Visitation into formal Religion one can preserve exactly its purpose... the Bishop of Geneva wholeheartedly and freely consents’ to the archbishop’s wish! So then, since souls, all souls, even the weak and infirm, can



First pages of a handwritten manuscript by Jeanne-Françoise de Chantal (Visitation monastery, Treviso).

‘seek the perfection of divine love’, in accordance with his spiritual principles, Francis ‘agreeably accepts the choice that the archbishop would like to make.’ ‘The purpose of the Congregation could easily be preserved in Religion, provided that it is loved, appreciated and favoured as it deserves, and as the need of the good of souls in this area of the Gauls demands.’

Nor is it even necessary to stress the perfect concordance between the concept of religious life that urged Francis to found the Visitation and the spiritual doctrine he expounds in the *Treatise on the Love of God*. The Order and the book (which came out in August 1616) matured together in the spirit of Francis, and in the preface to the *Treatise* he does not hide the fact that the care given to his Visitandines strongly influenced the drafting of the work: ‘I began indeed long ago to think of writing on holy love, but that thought came far short of what this occasion (the Visitation) has made me produce.’ It is certain that the personal sharing of his Daughters had ensured that Francis’ thinking would turn to concrete, practical aspects of religious life; but it is no less certain – and saying this does not in any way minimise the influence of the Visitation on the inspiration for the *Treatise*, if anything the opposite – that the *Treatise on the Love of God* was, in the author’s eyes, a book for all souls who wish to ‘seek the perfection of divine love’, even if they are ‘lay people and seculars’ living ‘amid the hassles of worldly affairs’; in the first instance it is the ‘Life of Holy Charity’ that he preached to everyone as the supreme expression of love, perfect abandonment to God’s will; and he proposes it as a unique model of holiness according to the doctrine of the ‘great and miraculous St Paul’, *Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ crucified*. Why wonder then that the *Treatise on the Love of God* and the Visitation Order have such intimate resonances between them: both were born from the same heart, the devout and apostolic heart, the evangelical heart of Francis de Sales.

Francis wrote one day to Baroness de Chantal who bore the name of Jesus on her bosom: ‘My point (of meditation) was about this

question of Sunday's prayer: *Sanctificetur nomen tuum*, Hallowed be your name. O God, he said, who will give me the happiness of one day seeing the name of Jesus engraved in the deepest part of the heart of she who bears it on her bosom?' The deepest part of the heart: It is only there that authentic conversions, reforms, and the reformation of souls, religious and secular souls, simple and priestly souls, are realised. The *Treatise on the Love of God*, this prodigious breviary of Christian mysticism, does none other than expose this fundamental idea of Francis de Sales. Where does it end up leading us to? The final chapter of 'these things, Theotimus, which by the grace and help of charity have been written to your charity', is entitled: 'That Mount Calvary is the academy of Love'. An academy of love? This is precisely the name with which Henri Bremond describes the Visitation of Holy Mary.⁴



4 H. BREMOND, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, vol. II, pp. 573-583.

9 – TOWARDS PURE LOVE

Third sojourn in Paris

Towards mid-October 1618, Francis de Sales took the road to Paris for the third time in his life. Not that Paris had not, on many an occasion, invited the preacher who had charmed the city in 1602: but the shady Charles Emmanuel had opposed the fact that Francis might preach the Lenten series there. Now he had to give way and allow Paris to once more see and hear Francis: in fact the Prince-Cardinal of Savoy¹ was going to the Court to ask for the hand of the young Christine of France for the Prince of Piedmont, eldest son of His Highness.

This ‘embassy’ succeeded: the wedding was celebrated in February 1619. But only in September did Francis leave for Savoy. The year spent in Paris was, for Francis, a very apostolic one: everyone wanted to hear him preach, speak with him, go to confession to him or have his advice. ‘I found such an increase in piety in Paris that it is marvellous’, he wrote. However, he did not forget his friends and his daughters in Annecy; the letters for Savoy are numerous and by no means the least pure, the least spiritual of those in the *Correspondence*. On 23 June 1619 he wrote to Mme de Chantal: ‘I would certainly like to have some beautiful bouquets of

1 Prince and Cardinal Maurice of Savoy was also a son of Charles Emmanuel I of Savoy, the only member of the House of Savoy to be created cardinal (he resigned from the clergy in 1642). He was part of the ‘embassy’ that went to France to negotiate the marriage of Princess Christine with his older brother, Victor Amadeus. Negotiations took a year.

flowers from the desert of our glorious St John to present to your dear soul; but mine, more sterile than the desert, has been unable to find any today, although in truth this morning and still now, my soul had a certain small, insensitive feeling of no longer wanting to live according to nature, but, as long as it is possible, according to faith, hope and Christian charity in imitation of this angelic man whom we see, in this deep desert, looking only at God and himself. How happy is the man who sees but these two objects, one which enraptures in sovereign love, and the other which casts him down in extreme abjection.'

This stay in Paris summarises, so to speak, and crowns the life and work of Francis de Sales. Mme Acarie had died, but the Carmel that he had helped her to found was a radiating centre. Francis spoke with Pierre de Bérulle who had introduced the Oratory to France, with Fr Bourdoise, and with Vincent de Paul, about the formation of the clergy.

He met Mother Angélique Arnauld who at the time was struggling with the reform of her Abbey of Port-Royal des Champs and with the even more arduous reform of the Abbey de Maubuisson, and he advised her: 'Do not burden yourself too much with vigils and austerity (and listen to me, dear daughter, because I am very well aware of what I am saying when advising this), but go to the *Port Royal* of religious life by following the royal road of the love of God and neighbour, humility and kindness.'

On 7 April 1619, he founded a new Visitation monastery in the capital and entrusted the direction of his daughters to Vincent de Paul, who would keep this office for more than forty years. Among the prelates he met at court he noted the young Bishop of Luçon, Bishop Armand du Plessis de Richelieu, and was noted by him: 'He swore full friendship and told me that in the end he would join my party, to think only of God and the salvation of souls.' Even though he did not keep this fine resolution, nevertheless Richelieu had great veneration for Francis de Sales.

Suddenly, during his stay at court, a serious risk threatened Francis: Cardinal de Gondi, Archbishop of Paris, backed by the Cardinals of La Rochefoucauld, and Perron, planned to keep the Bishop of Geneva in Paris and have him appointed as coadjutor with right of succession: King Louis XIII had agreed.

All difficulties had been foreseen and resolved: Francis' brother, Jean-François, would be appointed Bishop of Geneva (the archbishopric of Paris would even take on the expenses of the consecration!); Francis would have the rich abbey of Sainte-Geneviève... They had the good taste not to speak to him of the 'purple' that would not fail to cover his shoulders... 'The Blessed thanked the cardinal for his benevolence and at the same time explained to him that he had been attached elsewhere for many years: and that furthermore he did not even have the strength needed to support the weight of the bishopric in Geneva, given that he was about to become an old man and already saw how he was subject to many ills and ailments.'

The following year, on 26 February, speaking to Mother de Chantal, moved at learning of the promotion of Jean-François de Sales as coadjutor of Geneva, Francis would give not another version but another translation of his response: 'I told (the cardinal) fairly clearly at Tours that I would accept a divorce only if I were never to marry again... As for burdening me with someone else's wife out of obligation – that would really seem impossible to me!' But he could not escape the wish of the petite and delightful Princess Christine marie of France who, seduced by his good grace, wanted him as her grand almoner (chaplain): but at least he obtained that a clause he wanted would be included when he accepted the title: his brother Jean-François would carry out the role!



Monument to St Francis de Sales at the *Les Allinges* fortress,

The wish to retire, and the desire for solitude

‘I would accept a divorce only if I were not to marry again...’ This playful phrase undoubtedly hid a confession. Returning to Annecy, Francis resumed his usual concerns and occupations: but it really seemed that deep down in his heart, and without letting this be seen, he aspired to solitude. Some time later, Princess Christine Marie’s chaplain was appointed coadjutor at Geneva, without his brother having ‘ever said or written a single word, begged or made any recommendation.’ Francis wrote to Mme de Chantal on 14 May 1620: ‘My brother is a bishop: it is true that this does not enrich me, but it relieves me and gives me some hope of being able to retire from work: (and alluding to Cardinal de Gondi’s plans) it is better than a cardinal’s hat.’

During the summer he drew up the Constitutions for the Anchorites at Mont-Voiron: and he was not afraid to establish a properly ecclesial ideal for these somewhat wandering hermits: they would live there in holiness ‘for the great glory and veneration of the blessed and pure Virgin, Mother of Our Saviour Jesus Christ, for the salvation of their souls and the edification of the Catholic people in the provinces around this hermitage and, if not dedicating themselves to the conversion of heretics, at least they would be at their disposition so they could receive the light of the true and salutary faith’. By following Francis’ indications, the life of contemplation and penance once again found its gospel meaning.

During 1621, the Bishop of Geneva’s health worsened: ‘Our life is regulated by what we can and cannot eat’ he wrote to Mother de Chantal on 21 September, ‘and I can no longer write in the evening hours because my eyes cannot endure it, nor can my stomach. It will not depend on me that I will not be old for very long...’

In autumn, the Prior of Talloires told Francis that the hermitage of Saint Germain had been restored, as he had ordered, and he asked him to bless the sanctuary.

‘He admired the beauty of that hermitage,’ Charles-Auguste de Sales tells us ‘and among the praises one could not fail to discover his thinking: it has been decided, he said, seeing that I have a coadjutor, if it is possible in accordance with the will of our Serene Princes, I will go up there; this needs to be my repose, I will live in this hermitage since I have chosen it. And having said these words, opening the window that looked to the north and looking at the lake and the panorama of Annecy: O God, he said, how beautiful and pleasant it is to be here; we must definitely leave the burden of the day and the heat to our coadjutor, while with our rosary and pen we will serve God and his Church here. And know, Father Prior (he said, turning to him), that ideas would come to our head as vigorous and thick as the snows that fall in winter.’

In fact he had a number of works planned, whose titles – if we are to believe his acquaintances who revealed them at the depositions at the Processes – are significant for his spirituality: *A familiar explanation of the mysteries of our holy faith*, *Treatise on the four loves* (God, ourselves, our friends, our enemies), and especially a *Theandric History* ‘in which he wanted to describe the life of Our Lord made man and suggest ways of easily practising the gospel maxims...’ We must regret that Francis was unable to write these works; they certainly would have thrown light on his spirituality in a new and original way; but just from the titles themselves we can guess that the teaching would have been similar to that of the Introduction and the *Treatise on the Love of God*.

On the other hand, the interest of these projects goes beyond the projects themselves. ‘With our rosary and pen we will serve God and his Church here’: on the part of the former missionary of the Chablais, of the bishop who had preached so often, heard confessions, ‘who had spent himself and over-spent himself’ in the service of God and the Church, this suggestion indicates a spiritual leaning, means a choice that he who writes the history of a soul must consider as a stage. Undoubtedly Francis’ health was failing;



Annecy, the *Sainte Source*.



Annecy, Basilica of the Visitation.

business and journeys had tired him so much in body and spirit; but there was more to it: he sincerely believed that he could not make better use of his remaining strength in the service of God and the Church than praying and – thanks to his booklets distributed by the thousands – seeking out Philothea and Theotimus at home to help them speedily advance on the ‘royal road of love of God and neighbour’.

The journey to Avignon and his death

‘At that time, the most Christian King Louis XIII and His Serene Highness the Duke of Savoy thought of going to the city of Avignon (Louis XIII had just triumphed in the south of France against the Huguenot revolt of Benjamin de Rohan) and Blessed Francis received the express order to join them there as soon as possible.’ The bishop’s entourage was deeply concerned: ‘There was nobody who did not think badly of this journey for the holy bishop.’ They all advised him to inform His Highness of the ‘miserable state of his health. But he said: What do you want? We need to go where God calls us.’

Francis de Sales would die for wanting to obey God and his prince... ‘Foreseeing his death, he put his affairs in order and made his solemn last will and testament... which he duly signed and sealed... He immediately prepared everything needed for the journey, said goodbye to his family and expressly predicted his death.’

These farewells of Francis were distressing because he hid from no one that they really were farewells. He alone preserved a marvellous peace. On the morning of 8 November he celebrated Mass at the Oratory of the *Sainte Source*. ‘My dear daughters,’ he told them with supreme resignation, ‘may your only desire be

God; your only fear be losing him; your ambition, possessing him forever.'

Finally, the departure. Francis mounted his horse while in his name a few bushels of wheat were distributed to the poor: there was great poverty in the city at the time.

On 14 November, Francis arrived in Avignon. Celebration followed upon celebration for some ten days.

On Friday 25 November the King and the Duke left Avignon together and went to the province of Lyons. In Lyons, Francis sought shelter at his sisters' convent in Bellecour. 'Because of his love for holy poverty, he chose the gardener of the Visitation's house, a hovel rather than a house, where the sisters' confessor also lived, on the pretext that he would be freer to receive those who would come to greet him: and that he would not inconvenience his



St Francis de Sales' casket in the Basilica of the Visitation (Annecy).

own and would be ready more quickly for the spiritual service of his dear daughters.’

And indeed, very soon the small hovel saw an uninterrupted parade of visitors whose weight was added to that of official ceremonies and preaching. ‘My God,’ Francis wrote to a woman on 19 December 1622 ‘how happy are those who, free from the courts and the compliments that reign there, live peacefully in holy solitude at the foot of the crucifix!’

But it was necessary for Francis to give the final touch to his spiritual edifice and to show by deed and his example the supreme demands of ‘divine love.’ Everything we have said about his spirituality would be falsified were we not to insist on this final gesture of Francis de Sales, the spiritual director. ‘When will it be’ he had written in May 1616 to Mother de Chantal ‘that this natural love of blood, propriety, decorum, correspondences, sympathies, graces, will be purified and reduced to the perfect obedience of the purest love for the will of God?’

This time had now come for Mother de Chantal... ‘She had not spoken to him about her own internal matters for three and a half years.’ She was in Lyons on 10 November when Francis came to Avignon from Annecy. ‘But this time the Father and his Daughter did not have the time to see one another.

The Blessed ordered her to go and visit our houses in Montferrand and Saint-Etienne.’

On 12 December, Mother de Chantal, having returned to Lyons, hoped to once again meet Francis. To have more time, both had even ‘cancelled all other business.’ ‘Mother,’ Francis began, ‘we will have a little free time. Which of us will start to say what we have to say?’ ‘Our worthy Mother,’ Mother de Chaugy tells us in her memoirs, ‘who was burning to speak of some issues close to her heart, promptly responded: “Let me speak, Father, I beg you: my heart has a great need for you to look and see.”... “Mother,” Francis replied “we will speak about ourselves back in Annecy. For now,

let us bring some resolution to the things of our Congregation...” Mother de Chantal folded the piece of paper on which she had written her personal concerns and ‘explained those on which she had noted the things of the Institution.’ They spoke ‘for a good four hours’; then Francis ordered Mother de Chantal to visit the monasteries at Grenoble, Valence, Belley, Chambéry... He blessed her and said goodbye.

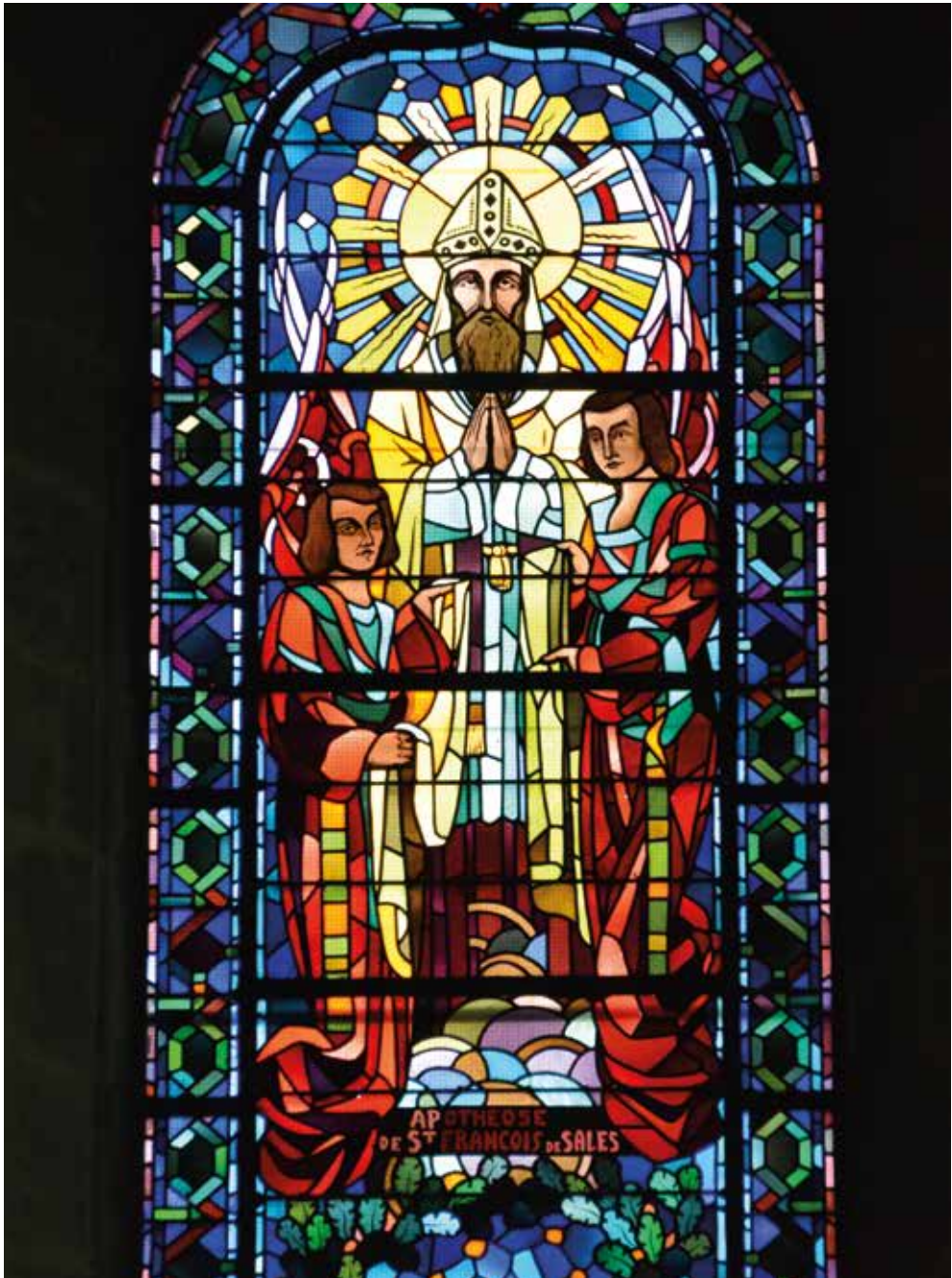
The perfection of spiritual friendship is to renounce oneself so that the soul can devote itself to the service of God and neighbour: here is the true end of the ‘Life of Holy Charity’, the end towards which Francis had led, one step after the other, the soul who entrusted herself to his leadership. Thus it was that this soul arrived fully at the ‘freedom of holy love’.

‘On Christmas Day he celebrated Midnight Mass with his dear sisters of the Visitation and gave them an exhortation filled with tenderness. At dawn he went to hear the confessions of the princes of Piedmont and celebrated the dawn Mass with them.’ at eleven he said the third Mass. ‘After lunch he gave the Visitation habit to two daughters and preached with great holiness.’ The following day ‘he attended to various matters’.

On Tuesday 27 December, the feast day of St John the Evangelist, towards ‘two in the afternoon... he fainted’. His servants carried him to bed. After a long day of agony that a surgical intervention in use at the time made very painful – the application of the ‘fire button’, ‘the holy bishop gently and peacefully rendered his innocent soul to God’. It was 28 December, the day of the feast of the Holy Innocents, at eight in the evening.

In the most painful moments of his illness and agony, Francis repeated these two names: *Jesus! Mary!*

At the time of his consecration, Francis de Sales had chosen as model for his episcopate the saintly Bishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo. His wish was fulfilled: ‘For the prelates of his time’ he was ‘another Saint Charles’. Many dared to go further: ‘We should



The glory of St Francis de Sales
(Annecy, Basilica of the Visitation).

call him the image of the Man-God' the Grand Prior of France once declared to the King's Council. The image of the Man-God? Yes, through his heart: Francis de Sales had above all a heart similar to the Heart of Jesus Christ...

One day, in 1619 or 1620, he made this precious confession to Mother de Chantal: 'There are no souls in the world who love more warmly, more tenderly and I would say more completely and lovingly than I since it has pleased God to make my heart thus. But just the same I love independent, vigorous souls that are not effeminate; since such great tenderness clouds the heart, worries it and distracts it from loving prayer to God, it prevents complete resignation and perfect death of self-love. What is not God is nothing to us. How can it be that I, who am the most affectionate person in the world, as you know, my dearest Mother, can feel these things? Truly, I do feel them; but it is marvellous how I put all these things together, for it is my opinion that I love nothing at all but God and all souls for God.'

'The most affectionate' and at the same time perfectly 'indifferent', the most free: what a confidence! Here Francis was confessing the ideal he tended towards and had souls tend towards. But then he added: 'How can it be?...'. Yes, such a spiritual state is a mystery of grace, and at the same time a mystery of the human heart! To achieve this 'perfection of divine love' there is no other method, therefore, than to let a person's heart surrender itself to God's Love, 'in 'complete despoliation of itself'. Here, finally, is the secret that the Bishop of Geneva reveals to us through his life and his work.

Francis de Sales' God was truly 'the God of the human heart'.

AFTERWORD

A word about the author of this book

This biography of Saint Francis de Sales was published by Fr André Ravier (1905–1999) some twenty years before his better-known work: *Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint*.¹

After Ravier's death, adding him to the necrology,² Jean Sainclair asked himself about the point of view he should use to describe his life. In fact, he was a teacher, writer, educator, but also a man of government as rector of a college and provincial of the Jesuits in France... Above all, however, he was a man who encountered God and wanted to offer the same experience to many others, as we can see from his countless works.

Born on 3 June 1905 in Poligny in the French Jura, the young André Ravier was educated at the *Notre Dame de Mont Roland college in Dole*. After his baccalaureate in philosophy (1922) he entered the Jesuit novitiate on the hill overlooking Lyons, near the famous Marian Shrine at Fourvière. Having completed his first cycle in philosophy at the Catholic University in Lyons, he then went to Grenoble where he gained his degree in arts and philosophy with a thesis on the image of God in the religious philosophy of Jules Lachelier. He was ordained priest in 1937.

After military service he taught Greek, Philology and French at the college in Yzeure. There, together with two of his confreres,

1 André RAVIER, *Un sage et un saint, François de Sales*, Paris, Nouvelle Cité 1985 (English translation. Francis de Sales. Sage and Saint, New York, DeSales Resource Center 2007).

2 Cf. *Compagnie. Courrier de la Province de France*, n. 333 (décembre 1999), pp. 191-194.

he founded a student association whose aim was, other than the spiritual life of the students, their complete human, religious, intellectual and social formation. In his spare time he undertook a research doctorate at the *École des hautes études* at the Sorbonne, on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*.

On the eve of World War II, he was enlisted as a second lieutenant in the French army. He miraculously survived the first turbulent days of war, but during a bombardment he lost almost all the materials for his thesis. He had to rewrite the thesis based on notes and tentative fragments. In September 1941, after discussion of the thesis, Ravier returned to Lyons. For eight years he was prefect then rector of the Collège Sainte-Hélène, where he could put his pedagogical studies to good use.

In 1951 he was appointed provincial of the Jesuits. It was a particularly critical moment, just after the encyclical *Humani Generis* by Pius XII and the "*affaires de Fourvière*". Fourvière was where the French Jesuits had their theological *scholasticate*. Prominent theologians like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Henri de Lubac and others taught there. Their theological teaching, however, was judged to be overly attentive to the historical-critical method, too closely linked to current cultural events. Rome intervened with heavy censures. As provincial, Fr Ravier was attentive and gentle in dealing with his condemned confreres, seeking to understand and encourage them. This shows up in his correspondence with Teilhard de Chardin, in exile in the United States. De Chardin, at the height of the crisis, wrote to a friend: "I have received an extremely kind and understanding letter from my provincial in Lyons [André Ravier]. It is the first time a superior has asked me to speak freely and constructively with him... Such gestures are worth more than all the decrees that tie me to the Order and more generally to the Church, and this for me is important."

When he had finished his mandate as provincial, Ravier could finally dedicate himself to his true vocation: as the writer.

He published popular books on the Curé of Ars and Bernadette Soubirous and on the spirituality of St Ignatius of Loyola, after a trip to Rome that allowed him to immerse himself in the Society's archives. During this period he gradually discovered St Francis de Sales, Claude de la Colombière, St Bruno the Cistercian and St Colette de Corbie.

From 1962 until 1968 he was rector of the Collège Saint-Louis-de-Gonzague in Paris. As he wrote, these were "six marvellous but difficult years". These were times of protest and struggle, but also valuable opportunities to reflect on the Catholic identity of the college and the socio-cultural transformations. 1968 was certainly a testing year for him.

After this task he was transferred to the beautiful *Les Fontaines* Castle in Chantilly, located in a wooded area some forty kilometres from Paris. It was an ideal place for Fr Ravier: he had a huge library available to him and the tranquillity needed for his intellectual work. From then on he was a full-time writer. Over twenty-two years he published a hundred or more books, articles and contributions of various kinds of a spiritual and historical nature.

Being the writer was not simply his second vocation or a new one. Writing was in his blood. From the years when he was prefect at the college in Yzeure and then when he was provincial – as we read in the necrology – he dedicated all his spare time at weekends to writing. He wrote monographs for various religious institutes. He liked archival research. He did not do this just to reconstruct the history of congregations and their founders, but to understand their spirituality and charismatic identity. He had his own style for writing books: he loved to illustrate them with images of places and objects, with photos and drawings, and documents. His writings succeeded in combining history and spirituality in a natural way. This is how he wrote about Sts Bruno, Francis de Sales, Bernadette Soubirous, Ignatius of Loyola, Claudio de la Colombière, Colette de Corbie and the Curé of Ars. He also published collections of

lectures, books on the spirituality of everyday life, guidelines for Catholic education, descriptions of churches and works of art, meditations on the experience of silence, on various forms of prayer, on the Church, on Lourdes... His work was translated into English, Italian, German, Dutch and Spanish. His writings have been published and republished even after his death.³

In his later years his health slowly deteriorated. His mind was clear, but he found it increasingly difficult to walk. He moved to Paris in 1994, to the Jesuit nursing home in the historical part of the city, where he continued to write and update his books.

Writing was his way of doing ministry, catechising, proclaiming the Gospel and speaking about God. In one of his last articles, he dwelt on the theme of the presence of God and presence to God, summarising what he had wanted to convey to his readers in his many works: that is, how man can experience God and come closer to him. "How can a human heart grasp something of the One who described Himself: "I am who am"? [...] Only experience allows us to perceive some sign of his Presence. What is certain is that God is constantly present to man, he calls him to meet him, but he waits for man to seek him out and come to meet him."⁴

The first paragraph of the article contains a personal, profound and lived profession of faith. God is present always and everywhere, because He has created everything; everything has been given to us by Him. God is present always and everywhere in man, formed in his image and likeness. He has revealed himself throughout history and in the fullness of time, with the Incarnation, the culmination of revelation took place. In his only Son, the Word became man. Whoever meets Christ meets God.

3 For example: *Mystique et pain quotidien*, Paris, Parole et Silence 2002; *Saint Bruno*. Le Chartreux, Paris, Lethielleux 32003; *En retraite chez soi*, Paris, Parole et Silence 52015.

4 André RAVIER, *Présence de Dieu, présence à Dieu*, in "Revue des sciences religieuses" 70 (1996) n. 3, p. 353.

In the second paragraph he asks himself why man is so insensitive to God's presence. How come we do not feel and see it? There is a very personal touch here that makes his writing more than just a theological reflection: it is the result of long years of research and meditation. It is a very dense synthesis of his thought and his experience of the interior life. He takes the reader by the hand, shows them the obstacles that prevent them from approaching God and offers his advice for an effective spiritual journey, advice inspired by his great model, his source par excellence, Saint Francis de Sales.

Placing ourselves in God's presence, Ravier writes, is first of all an act of faith. We need to be aware that God is present, sees us, listens to us, loves us. It is something we all know but do not place much store on. We are constantly immersed in the flow of love that emanates from the Father: there, in that love, we can deeply experience the presence of God, as Francis de Sales teaches in the *Treatise on the Love of God*.

The believer must gradually move from being in God's presence to living "constantly" in God's presence. This, writes Ravier, is not easy. We think that our human nature does not allow us to do so, because we are naturally distracted, weak. But God knows us as we are, knows who we are, and despite everything, has immense love for us. So, as St Francis de Sales teaches, do not dream of being what you are not, but desire to be what you are... Don't wait for everything to be perfect, for God welcomes everyone just as they are.

Once again, Ravier uses the words of the bishop of Geneva: 'The ultimate in loving ecstasy is not to seek one's own will, but God's, and not to seek satisfaction in one's own will, but in God's.' To feel God's presence is to lose oneself completely in Him: this is our *raison d'être*. Abandonment to God, total unity between the believer and the Creator, is not only the ultimate goal of human existence, but also its source and cause.

This is the fundamental core, the heart and soul of the work of André Ravier. Through his books he intends to guide us to the only transformation needed in life: that of abandonment in God and union with God. After reading, re-reading and meditating on his works, books and articles, we cannot help but conclude that he was the first to follow this path which was indicated to him by the saints he studied. He encourages us to do the same.

Wim Collin, sdb.



“The man who best reproduced the Son of man living on earth”. This is how, at the Canonisation Process in Paris, St Vincent de Paul testified to the superior virtues of Francis de Sales.

In a detailed and passionate way, this biography offers an original spiritual portrait of the Saint.

Francis de Sales is someone who, like Jesus Christ on earth, sought to love God with all his human heart, and having experienced the demands and sweetness of this gift, worked to introduce the greatest possible number of souls to what he himself called “the eternal freedom of love”.

The book outlines the salient features of Francis’ life: his heart as a man, priest, bishop and founder, and his extraordinary ability as a spiritual guide.

ANDRÉ RAVIER, (1905-1999), Jesuit, former provincial superior in Lyons, always nurtured studies of spirituality. He is especially known for his biographies of Ignatius of Loyola, Bernadette Soubirous, Francis de Sales, Jeanne de Chantal and the Curé of Ars.



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