The Education of Conscience with St. Francis de Sales

It was most likely the advent of the Protestant Reformation that brought the issue of conscience—and more precisely, "freedom of conscience"—to the forefront. In a 1597 letter to Clement VIII, the Provost of Sales lamented the "tyranny" that the "state of Geneva" imposed "on the consciences of Catholics." He asked the Holy See to intervene with the King of France to ensure that the Genevans would be granted "what they call freedom of conscience." Opposed to military solutions for the Protestant crisis, he glimpsed in libertas conscientiae a possible way out of violent confrontation, provided reciprocity was respected. Claimed by Geneva for the Reformation and by Francis de Sales for Catholicism, freedom of conscience was about to become a pillar of modern thought.

The Dignity of the Human Person

The dignity of the individual lies in conscience, and conscience is first and foremost synonymous with sincerity, honesty, frankness, and conviction. The Provost of Sales acknowledged, for example, "to ease his conscience," that the project of the Controversies had been somewhat imposed on him by others. When presenting his reasons in favour of Catholic doctrine and practice, he took care to specify that he did so "in conscience." "Tell me in conscience," he asked his opponents. A "good conscience" ensures one avoids certain acts that contradict oneself.

However, individual subjective conscience cannot always be taken as a guarantee of objective truth. One is not always obliged to believe what someone says in conscience. "Show me clearly," the Provost said to the lords of Thonon, "that you are not lying at all, that you are not deceiving me when you say that in conscience you had this or that inspiration." Conscience can fall victim to illusion, whether voluntarily or

involuntarily. “Hardened misers not only do not confess their greed but do not even think in conscience that they are greedy.”

The formation of the conscience is an essential task because freedom of conscience carries the risk of “doing good and evil,” but “choosing evil is not using, but rather, abusing our freedom.” It is a difficult task because conscience sometimes appears as an adversary that “always fights against us and for us.” It “steadily resists our bad inclinations,” but does so “for our salvation.” When one sins, “inner remorse moves against our conscience with a drawn sword,” but only to “pierce it with holy fear.”

A means to exercise responsible freedom is the practice of the “examination of conscience.” Examining one’s conscience is like following the example of doves that look at each other “with clear and pure eyes,” “groom themselves carefully, and adorn themselves as best they can.” Philothea is invited to perform this examination every evening before bed, asking oneself, “how one behaved at various times of the day. To make it easier, one should reflect on where, with whom, and in what occupations one was engaged.”

Once a year, we must conduct a thorough examination of the “state of our soul” before God, our neighbour, and ourselves, not forgetting an “examination of our soul’s affections.” The examination—Francis de Sales tells the Visitandines—will lead you to “probe your conscience deeply.”

How to lighten the conscience when burdened by error or fault? Some do so poorly, judging and accusing others “of vices they themselves succumb to,” thinking this will “soften their conscience’s remorse.” This multiplies the risk of rash judgments. Conversely, “those who properly care for their conscience are not at all prone to rash judgments.” The case of parents, educators, and public officials deserves special consideration, for “a good part of their conscience consists in carefully watching over the conscience of others.”

Self-Respect

From the affirmation of each person's dignity and responsibility must arise self-respect. Socrates and all ancient pagan and Christian thought had already shown the way:

It is a saying of the philosophers, yet held valid by Christian doctors: "Know thyself"—that is, know the excellence of your soul so as not to debase or despise it.

Certain acts offend not only God but also human dignity and reason. Their consequences are deplorable:

The likeness and image of God we bear within us is stained and disfigured, the dignity of our spirit dishonoured, and we are made similar to irrational animals […], enslaving ourselves to our passions and overturning the order of reason.

There are ecstasies that elevate us above our natural state and others that debase us. "O men, how long will you be so senseless," writes the author of Theotimus, "as to trample your natural dignity, voluntarily descending and plunging yourselves into the condition of beasts?"

Self-respect helps avoid two opposite dangers: pride and contempt for one's gifts. In a century where honour was highly exalted, Francis de Sales had to denounce crimes, particularly duelling, which made his "hair stand on end," and even more, the senseless pride behind it. "I am scandalised," he wrote to the wife of a duelling husband; "truly, I cannot fathom how one could have such unbridled courage even over trifles." Fighting a duel is like "becoming each other's executioner."
Others, conversely, dare not acknowledge their gifts and thus sin against gratitude. Francis de Sales condemns "a certain false and foolish humility that prevents them from seeing the good in themselves." They are wrong, for "the goods God has placed in us must be acknowledged, valued, and sincerely honoured."
The first neighbour I must respect and love, the Bishop of Geneva seems to say, is myself. True self-love and due respect

demand that I strive for perfection and correct myself if needed, but gently, reasonably, and “following the path of compassion” rather than anger and fury.

There exists a self-love that is not only legitimate but beneficial and commanded, “Charity well-ordered begins with oneself,” says the proverb, reflecting Francis de Sales’ thought—provided one does not confuse self-love with self-centredness. Self-love is good, and Philothea is asked to examine how she loves herself:

Keep good order in loving yourself? For only disordered self-love can ruin us. Ordered love requires that we love the soul more than the body and seek virtue above all else.

Conversely, self-centredness is selfish, “narcissistic” love, fixated on itself, jealous of its beauty, and concerned only with self-interest. “Narcissus, say the profane, was a youth so scornful he would offer his love to none; finally, gazing at his reflection in a clear fountain, he was utterly captivated by his beauty.”

The “Respect Due to Persons”

If one respects oneself, one is better prepared to respect others. Being “the image and likeness of God” implies that “all human beings share the same dignity.” Francis de Sales, though living in a deeply unequal society marked by the ancient regime, promoted thought and practice marked by “respect due to persons.”

Start with children. St. Bernard’s mother—says the author of Philothea—loved her newborns “with respect as something sacred God had entrusted to her.” A grave rebuke from the Bishop of Geneva to pagans concerned their contempt for defenceless lives. Respect for a baby about to be born emerges in a letter written according to the Baroque rhetoric of the time to a pregnant woman. He encourages her by explaining to her that the child forming in her womb is not only “a living image of the Divine Majesty”, but also an image of its mother. He advises another woman:

Offer often to the eternal glory of your Creator the little creature whose formation He has wanted to take you as His cooperator.

Another aspect of respect for others concerns the theme of freedom. The discovery of new lands had as a disastrous consequence, the re-emergence of slavery, that recalled the practice of the ancient romans at the time of paganism. The sale of human beings degraded them to the level of animals.

One day, Marc Antony bought two youths from a merchant; back then, as still happens in some lands, children were sold—men procured and traded them like horses in our countries.

Respect for others is subtly threatened by gossip and slander. Francis de Sales insists heavily on "sins of the tongue." A chapter in Philothea which deals explicitly with this subject, is titled Honesty in Words and Respect Due to Persons states that ruining someone's reputation is "spiritual murder," robbing them of "civil life." When condemning vice, one should spare the person involved as much as possible.
Certain groups are easily scorned. Francis de Sales defends the dignity of common people, citing the Gospel. He comments that "St. Peter was rough, coarse, an old fisherman of low station; a trader of low condition. Saint John, on the contrary, was a gentleman, sweet, lovable, wise; saint Peter, instead, was ignorant." Well, it was St Peter who was chosen to guide others and to be the "universal superior".
He proclaims the dignity of the sick, saying that, "the souls who are on the cross are declared queens." Denouncing "cruelty towards the poor" and exalting the "dignity of the poor", he justifies and specifies the attitude to be taken towards them, explaining "how we must honour them and, therefore, visit them as representatives of our Lord." No one is useless; no one is insignificant. "There is no object in the world that cannot be useful for something; but you must know how to find its use and place."

The “one-different” Salesian”

The eternal human that has always tormented human society is reconciling individual dignity and freedom with that of the others. Francis de Sales offered an original solution by coining a term. In fact, assuming that the universe is made up of “all things created, visible and invisible” and that “their diversity is brought back into unity”, the Bishop of Geneva proposed to call it “one-diverse“, that is, “unique and diverse, unique with diversity and diverse with unity.”

For him, every being is unique. People are like Pliny’s pearls, “so unique in quality that no two are perfectly equal.” His two major works, Introduction to the Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God—are addressed to individuals, Philothea and Theotimus. What variety and diversity among beings! “Without doubt, as we see that two men are never perfectly equal as to the gifts of nature, so they are never perfectly equal as to the supernatural gifts.” The variety also enchanted him from a purely aesthetic point of view, but he feared an indiscreet curiosity about its causes:

If someone asked why God made melons larger than strawberries, or lilies bigger than violets; why rosemary isn’t a rose or a carnation a marigold; why peacocks are prettier than bats, or figs sweet and lemons sour—we’d laugh and say: poor man, the world’s beauty requires variety, it is necessary that in things there are diverse and differentiated perfections and that the one is not the other. This is why some are small, others large; some harsh, others sweet; some more beautiful, others less. […] All have their value, their grace, their splendour, and all, seen in the totality of their varieties, constitute a wonderful spectacle of beauty.

Diversity does not hinder unity; on the contrary, it makes it richer and more beautiful. Each flower has its characteristics that distinguish it from all the others. “It is not exactly of the roses to be white, it seems to me, because those vermilions are more beautiful and have a better scent, which

however is proper to the lily.” Of course, Francis de Sales does not tolerate confusion and disorder, but he is equally an enemy of uniformity. The diversity of beings can lead to dispersion and rupture of communion, but if there is love, “bond of perfection”, nothing is lost, on the contrary, diversity is exalted by the union.

In Francis de Sales there is certainly a real culture of the individual, but this is never a closure to the group, the community or society. He spontaneously sees each person marked by their “state of life,” which marks the identity and belonging of each one. It will not be possible to establish an equal programme or project for all, simply because it will be applied and implemented in a different way “for the gentleman, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the widow, the maiden, the married.” It must also be adapted “to the strengths and duties of each individual. The bishop of Geneva sees society divided into vital spaces characterized by social belonging and group solidarity, as when he deals with “the company of soldiers, the workshop of craftsmen, the court of princes, the family of married people.”

Love personalizes and, therefore, individualizes. The affection that binds one person to another is unique, as demonstrated by Francis de Sales in his relationship with Chantal’s wife, “Every affection has a peculiarity that differentiates it from the others. What I feel for you possesses a certain particularity that comforts me infinitely, and, to say everything, is very fruitful for me.” The sun illuminates each and every one, “illuminating a corner of the earth, it does not illuminate it less than what it would do if it did not shine elsewhere, but only in that corner.”

The human being is in a state of becoming

A Christian humanist, Francis de Sales ultimately believed in the human person’s capacity for self-improvement. Erasmus had coined the phrase: Homines non nascuntur sed finguntur (Men are not born but made). While animals are predetermined beings driven by instinct, humans, in contrast, are in perpetual

evolution. Not only do they change, but they can also change themselves, for better or for worse.
What entirely preoccupied the author of Theotimus was perfecting himself and helping others to perfect themselves, not only in religious matters but in all things. From birth to the grave, man is in a state of apprenticeship. Let us imitate the crocodile, which "never stops growing as long as it lives." Indeed, "remaining in the same state for long is impossible. in this traffic, whoever does not advance falls behind; on this ladder, whoever does not climb, descends; in this battle, whoever does not conquer is conquered." He quotes St. Bernard, who said, "It is written especially for man that he will never be found in the same state: he must either advance or regress." Let us move forward:

Do you not know that you are on a journey and that the path is not made for sitting but for moving forward? He is so made for progress, that moving forward is called walking.

This also means that the human person is educable, capable of learning, correcting themselves, and improving themselves. And this holds true at all levels. Age sometimes has nothing to do with it. Look at these choirboys of the cathedral, who far surpass their bishop's abilities in this domain. "I admire these children," he said, "who can barely speak yet already sing their parts; they understand all musical signs and rules, while I, a grown man who might pass for a great figure, would not know how to manage." No one in this world is perfect:

There are people naturally frivolous, others rude, others still reluctant to listen to others' opinions, and others prone to indignation, others to anger, and others to love. In short, few are free people are free from one or another of these imperfections.

Should we despair of improving our temperament, correcting some of our natural inclinations? Not at all.

For though these traits may be innate and natural in each of us, if they can be corrected and regulated through disciplined effort, or even eradicated, then, I tell you, Philothea, it must be done. Bitter almonds have been made sweet by piercing them at the base to drain their juice; why should we not drain our own perverse inclinations to become better?

Hence, the optimistic yet demanding conclusion. “There is no good nature that cannot be corrupted by vicious habits, nor any nature so perverse that it cannot, first by God’s grace and then through diligent effort, be tamed and overcome.” If man is educable, we must never despair of anyone and guard ourselves well against prejudice in regard to people:

Do not say: That man is a drunkard, even if you have seen him drunk; ‘an adulterer,’ for having witnessed his sin; ‘incestuous,’ for catching him in that disgrace, because one action is not enough to define a thing. […] And even if a man were long steeped in vice, you’d risk falsehood by calling him vicious.

The human person has never finished tending their garden. This was the lesson the founder of the Visitation nuns instilled when urging them to “cultivate the soil and garden” of their hearts and minds, for no one is “so perfect as to need no effort to grow in perfection or preserve it.”

Female education with Saint Francis de Sales

The educational thinking of Saint Francis de Sales reveals a profound and innovative vision of the role of women in the Church and society of his time. Convinced that the education

of women was fundamental for the moral and spiritual growth of the entire community, the holy bishop of Geneva promoted a balanced education that respected female dignity but was also attentive to fragility. With a paternal and realistic gaze, he was able to recognise and value the qualities of women, encouraging them to cultivate virtue, culture, and devotion. Founder of the Visitation with Jane de Chantal, he vigorously defended the female vocation even in the face of criticism and prejudice. His teaching continues to offer relevant insights into education, love, and freedom in choosing one's own life.

During his trip to Paris in 1619, Francis de Sales met Adrien Bourdoise, a reformist priest, who reproached him for paying too much attention to women. The bishop calmly replied that women were half of humanity and that by forming good Christian women, there would be good young people, and with good young people, there would be good priests. After all, did not St. Jerome devote a great deal of time and various writings to them? Francis de Sales recommended the reading of his letters to Madame de Chantal, who found in them, among other things, numerous instructions "for educating her daughters". It can be deduced that, in his eyes, the role of women in education justified the time and attention devoted to them.

Francis de Sales and the women of his time

"We must help the female sex, which is despised," the Bishop of Geneva once said to Jean-François de Blonay. To understand Francis de Sales' concerns and thinking, it is necessary to place him in his own time. It must be said that a number of his statements still seem very much in line with the thinking of the current time. In the women of his time, he deplored "this feminine tenderness towards themselves," their ease "in pitying themselves and desiring to be pitied," a greater propensity than men "to give credence to dreams, to be afraid of spirits, and to be credulous and superstitious," and above all, the "twists and turns of their

vain thoughts." Among the advice he gave to Madame de Chantal on the education of her daughters, he wrote without hesitation, "Remove vanity from their souls; it is born almost at the same time as sex."

However, women are endowed with great qualities. He wrote about Madame de La Fléchère, who had just lost her husband, "If I had only this perfect sheep in my flock, I would not be distressed at being the shepherd of this afflicted diocese. After Madame de Chantal, I do not know if I have ever met a stronger soul in a female body, a more reasonable spirit and a more sincere humility." Women are by no means the last in the practice of virtue. "Have we not seen many great theologians who have said wonderful things about virtue, but not in order to practise it, while, on the contrary, there are many holy women who cannot speak of virtue, but who nevertheless know very well how to practise it?"

Married women are the worthiest of admiration, "Oh my God! How pleasing to God are the virtues of a married woman; for they must be strong and excellent to endure in such a vocation!" In the struggle to preserve chastity, he believed that "women have often fought more courageously than men."

Founder of a congregation of women together with Jeanne de Chantal, he was in constant contact with the first religious. Alongside praise, criticism began to rain down. Pushed into these trenches, the founder had to defend himself and defend them, not only as religious women, but also as women. In a document that was to serve as a preface to the Constitutions of the Visitandines, we find the polemical vein he was capable of displaying, directing himself no longer against 'heresiarchs' but against malicious and ignorant 'censors':

The presumption and inappropriate arrogance of many children of this century, who ostentatiously condemn everything that is not in accordance with their spirit […], gives me the opportunity, or rather compels me, to write this Preface, my

dearest Sisters, to arm and defend your holy vocation against the barbs of their pestilent tongues, so that good and pious souls, who are undoubtedly attached to your lovable and honoured Institute, may find here how to repel the arrows shot by the temerity of these bizarre and insolent censors.

Perhaps foreseeing that such a preamble might damage the cause, the founder of the Visitation wrote a second, softened edition, with the aim of highlighting the fundamental equality of the sexes. After quoting Genesis, he commented as follows, “Woman, therefore, no less than man, has the grace of having been made in the image of God; equal honour in both sexes; their virtues are equal.”

The education of daughters

The enemy of true love is “vanity”. This was the flaw that Francis de Sales, like the moralists and educators of his time, feared most in the education of young women. He points out several manifestations of it. Look at “these young ladies of the world, who, having established themselves well, go about puffed up with pride and vanity, with their heads held high, their eyes open, eager to be noticed by the worldly.”

The Bishop of Geneva amuses himself a little in mocking these “society girls”, who “wear loose, powdered hats”, with their heads “shod like horses’ hooves”, all “plumed and flowered beyond description” and “laden with frills”. There are those who “wear dresses that are tight and very uncomfortable, just to show that they are slim; this is true madness that mostly makes them incapable of doing anything.”

What then are we to think of certain artificial beauties transformed into “boutiques of vanity”? Francis de Sales prefers a “clear and clean face;” he wants “nothing affected, because everything that is embellished is displeasing.” Should we therefore condemn all “artifice”? He readily admits that “in the case of some defect of nature, it

must be corrected so that the correction can be seen, but stripped of all artifice."

And perfume? the preacher asked himself when speaking of Mary Magdalene. "It is an excellent thing," he replied, "even the one who is perfumed perceives something excellent in it," adding, as a connoisseur, that "Spanish musk is highly prized throughout the world." In the chapter on "decency in dress," he allows young women to wear clothes with various adornments, "because they may freely desire to be pleasing to many, but with the sole purpose of winning a young man with a view to holy matrimony." He concluded with this indulgent observation, "What do you want? It is only fitting that young ladies should be a little pretty."

It should be added that reading the Bible had prepared him not to be harsh in the face of female beauty. In the lover of the *Song of Songs*, admired "the remarkable beauty of her face, like a *bouquet* of flowers." He describes Jacob who, meeting Rachel at the well, "wept tears of joy when he saw a virgin who pleased him and enchanted him with the grace of her face." He also loved to tell the story of St. Brigid, born in Scotland, a country where "the most beautiful creatures one can see" are admired; she was "an extremely attractive young woman," but her beauty was "natural," our author points out.

The Salesian ideal of beauty is called 'good grace,' which designates not only "the perfect harmony of the parts that make something beautiful," but also the "grace of movements, gestures, and actions, which is like the soul of life and beauty," that is, goodness of heart. Grace requires "simplicity and modesty." Now, grace is a perfection that comes from within the person. It is beauty combined with grace that makes Rebecca the feminine ideal of the Bible. She was "so beautiful and graceful at the well where she drew water for the flock," and her "familiar goodness" inspired her to give water not only to Abraham's servants but also to his camels.

Education and preparation for life

In the time of St. Francis de Sales, women had little opportunity to pursue higher education. Girls learned what they heard from their brothers and, when the family could afford it, attended a convent. Reading was certainly more common than writing. Colleges were reserved for boys, so learning Latin, the language of culture, was practically forbidden to girls.

We must believe that Francis de Sales was not opposed to women becoming educated, but on condition that they did not fall into pedantry and vanity. He admired Saint Catherine, who was "very learned, but humble in her great knowledge," Among the bishop of Geneva's female interlocutors, the Lady of La Fléchère had studied Latin, Italian, Spanish, and the fine arts, but she was an exception.

In order to find their place in life, both socially and religiously, young women often needed special help at a certain point. Georges Rolland reports that the bishop personally took care of several difficult cases. A woman from Geneva with three daughters was generously assisted by the bishop, "with money and credit; he placed one of her daughters as an apprentice with an honest lady in the city, paying her board for six years, in grain and money." He also donated 500 florins for the marriage of the daughter of a printer in Geneva.

The religious intolerance of the time sometimes caused tragedies, which Francis de Sales tried to remedy. Marie-Judith Gilbert, educated in Paris by her parents in the 'errors of Calvin,' discovered the book *Filotea* at the age of nineteen, which she dared to read only in secret. She took a liking to the author, whom she had heard about. Closely watched by her father and mother, she managed to be taken away by carriage, was instructed in the Catholic religion, and entered the Visitation Sisters.

The social role of women was still rather limited. Francis de Sales was not entirely opposed to women's involvement in public life. He wrote in these terms, for

example, to a woman who was given to intervene in public affairs, both appropriately and inappropriately:

Your sex and your vocation allow you to repress evil outside yourselves, but only if this is inspired by good and accomplished with simple, humble, and charitable remonstrances towards transgressors and by warning your superiors as far as possible.

On the other hand, it is significant that a contemporary of Francis de Sales, Mademoiselle de Gournay, an early feminist *ante litteram*, an intellectual and author of controversial texts such as her treatise *L'égalité des hommes et des femmes* (The Equality of Men and Women) and *La plainte des femmes* (The Complaint of Women), expressed great admiration for him. She devoted her entire life to demonstrating this equality, gathering all possible evidence on the subject, without forgetting that of the "good and holy bishop of Geneva".

Education to love

Francis de Sales spoke a lot about God's love, but he was also very attentive to the manifestations of human love. For him, in fact, love is one, even if its 'object' is different and unequal. To explain God's love, he could do no better than start from human love.

Love arises from the contemplation of beauty, and beauty can be perceived by the senses, especially by the eyes. An interactive phenomenon is established between the gaze and beauty. "Contemplating beauty makes us love it, and love makes us contemplate it." The sense of smell reacts in the same way; in fact, "perfumes exercise their unique power of attraction through their sweetness."

After the intervention of the external senses, the internal senses take over, the imagination and fantasy, which exalt and transfigure reality. "By virtue of this reciprocal movement of love towards sight and sight towards

love, just as love makes the beauty of the beloved more resplendent, so the sight of the beloved makes love more enamoured and pleasant." We can then understand why "those who have painted Cupid have blindfolded him, affirming that love is blind." At this point, love-passion arrives; it makes us "seek dialogue, and dialogue often nourishes and increases love;" moreover, "it desires secrecy, and when lovers have no secrets to tell each other, they sometimes take pleasure in telling them secretly;" and finally, it leads us to "utter words that would certainly be ridiculous if they did not spring from a passionate heart."

Now, this love-passion, which perhaps boils down to nothing more than 'amorucci' (little loves) and 'galanterie' (gallantries), is exposed to various vicissitudes, to such an extent that it prompts the author of the *Filotea* to intervene with a series of considerations and warnings about "frivolous friendships that are formed between people of the opposite sex and without any intention of marriage." Often, they are nothing more than "abortions or, rather, semblances of friendship."

St. Francis de Sales also expressed his views on kissing, wondering, for example, along with the ancient commentators, why Rachel allowed Jacob to embrace her. He explains that there are two kinds of kisses: one bad, the other good. Kisses that are easily exchanged between young people and that are not bad at first can become so later because of human frailty. But a kiss can also be good. In certain places, it is required by custom. "Our Jacob embraces his Rachel very innocently; Rachel accepts this kiss of courtesy from this man of good character and clean face." "Oh!" concluded Francis de Sales, "give me people who have the innocence of Jacob and Rachel, and I will allow them to kiss each other."

On the question of dancing, which was also on the agenda, the Bishop of Geneva avoided absolute commands, as did the rigorists of the time, both Catholic and Protestant, while still showing great prudence. He was even harshly

reproached for writing that “dances and ballroom dancing are in themselves indifferent things.” As with certain games, they too become dangerous when one becomes so attached to them that one can no longer detach oneself from them. Dancing “must be done for recreation and not for passion; for a short time and not to the point of exhaustion and dizziness.” What is more dangerous is that these pastimes often become occasions that provoke “quarrels, envy, mockery, and love affairs.”

The choice of lifestyle

When the little daughter grows up, “the day comes when it is necessary to talk to her, I mean to refer to the decisive word, the one in which one tells young women that one wants to marry them off.” A man of his time, Francis de Sales largely shared the idea that parents had an important role in determining their children’s vocation, whether to marriage or religious life. “One does not usually choose one’s prince or bishop, one’s father or mother, and often, not even one’s husband,” noted the author of *Filotea*. However, he clearly states that “daughters cannot be given in marriage as long as they say no.”

The current practice is well explained in this passage from the Philothea: “For a marriage to truly take place, three things are necessary with regard to the young woman who is to be given in marriage. First, that the proposal be made to her; second, that she accepts it; and third, that she consents to it.” Since girls often married at a very young age, their emotional immaturity is not surprising. “Girls who marry very young truly love their husbands, if they have them, but they never cease to love their rings, their jewellery, and their friends with whom they have so much fun playing, dancing, and acting foolishly.”

The problem of freedom of choice arose equally for children who were destined for religious life. La Franceschetta, daughter of the Baroness of Chantal, was to be placed in a convent by her mother, who wanted her to become a nun, but the bishop intervened. “If Franceschetta willingly

wants to be a nun, fine; if not, I do not approve of her will being anticipated by decisions that are not hers." Moreover, it would not be appropriate for the reading of St. Jerome's letters to lead the mother too much in the direction of severity and coercion. He therefore advised her to "use moderation" and to proceed with "gentle inspiration".

Some young women hesitate between religious life and marriage, without ever making up their minds. Francis de Sales encouraged the future Mrs. de Longecombe to take the step of marriage, which he wanted to celebrate himself. He did this good work, her husband would later say, in response to his wife's request "that she wished to marry by the hands of the bishop, and without his presence, she would never have been able to take this step, because of the great aversion she felt towards marriage."

Women and 'devotion'

Unfamiliar with any form of feminism *ante litteram*, Francis de Sales was aware of the exceptional contribution of femininity on a spiritual level. It has been pointed out that by encouraging devotion in women, the author of *Philothea* also encouraged the possibility of greater autonomy, a "private life for women".

It is not surprising that women have a particular disposition for 'devotion'. After listing a number of doctors and experts, he was able to write in the preface to *Teotimo*: "But in order that it may be known that this kind of writing is better composed with the devotion of lovers than with the doctrine of the wise, the Holy Spirit has caused many women to perform wonders in this regard. Who has ever better manifested the heavenly passions of divine love than Saint Catherine of Genoa, Saint Angela of Foligno, Saint Catherine of Siena, and Saint Matilda?" The influence of Chantal's mother in the writing of the *Teotimo* is well known, particularly in the ninth book, "your ninth book on the *Love of God*," according to the author's expression.

Could women get involved in matters concerning

religion? “Here is this woman who acts as a theologian,” says Francis de Sales, speaking of the Samaritan woman in the Gospel. Must we necessarily see this as disapproval of women theologians? Not necessarily. Especially since he strongly affirms, “I tell you that a simple and poor woman can love God as much as a doctor of theology.” Superiority does not always reside where one thinks it does.

There are women who are superior to men, starting with the Blessed Virgin. Francis de Sales always respected the principle of order established by the religious and civil laws of his time, to which he preached obedience, but his practice testified to a great freedom of spirit. Thus, for the government of women’s monasteries, he believed that it was better for them to be under the jurisdiction of the bishop rather than dependent on their religious brothers, who risked weighing excessively on them.

The Visitation Sisters, for their part, would not depend on any male order and would have no central government, each monastery being under the jurisdiction of the local bishop. He dared to give the unexpected title of ‘apostles’ to the sisters of the Visitation setting out on a new foundation.

If we interpret the thinking of the Bishop of Geneva correctly, the ecclesial mission of women consists in proclaiming not the word of God, but ‘the glory of God’ through the beauty of their witness. The heavens, prays the psalmist, tell of God’s glory only by their splendour. “The beauty of the heavens and the firmament invites men to admire the greatness of the Creator and to proclaim his wonders;” and “is it not a greater wonder to see a soul adorned with many virtues than a sky studded with stars?”

Joseph Augustus Arribat: Righteous Among the Nations

1. Biographical Profile

The Venerable Joseph Augustus Arribat was born on 17 December 1879 in Trédou (Rouergue – France). The poverty of his family forced the young Augustus to begin secondary school at the Salesian oratory in Marseilles only at the age of 18. Due to the political situation at the turn of the century, he began Salesian life in Italy and received the cassock from the hands of Blessed Michael Rua. Back in France he began, like all his confreres, Salesian life in a semi-clandestine state, first in Marseilles and then in La Navarre, founded by Don Bosco in 1878.

Ordained a priest in 1912, he was called to arms during the First World War and worked as a stretcher-bearer nurse. After the war Fr Arribat continued to work intensively at La Navarre until 1926, after which he went to Nice where he stayed until 1931. He returned to La Navarre as rector and at the same time was in charge of the parish of St Isidore in the valley of Sauvebonne. His parishioners called him “the saint of the valley”.

At the end of his third year, he was sent to Morges, in the canton of Vaud, Switzerland. He then received three successive mandates of six years each, first in Millau, then in Villemur and finally in Thonon in the diocese of Annecy. His most dangerous and grace-filled period was probably his assignment in Villemur during the Second World War. Returning to La Navarre in 1953, Fr Arribat remained there until his death on 19 March 1963.

2. Profoundly a man of God

A man of daily duty, nothing was secondary for him, and everyone knew that he got up very early to clean the pupils’ toilets and the courtyard. Having become rector of the

Salesian house, and wanting to do his duty to the end and to perfection, out of respect and love for others, he often finished his days very late, shortening his hours of rest. On the other hand, he was always available, welcoming to all, knowing how to adapt to everyone, be it benefactors and large landowners, or house servants, maintaining a permanent concern for the novices and confreres, and especially for the young people entrusted to him.

This total gift of self manifested itself to the point of heroism. During the Second World War he did not hesitate to host Jewish families and young people, exposing himself to the grave risk of indiscretion or denunciation. Thirty-three years after his death, those who had directly witnessed his heroism recognised the value of his courage and the sacrifice of his life. His name is inscribed in Jerusalem, where he was officially recognised as a “Righteous Among the Nations”.

He was recognised by everyone as a true man of God, who did “everything out of love, and nothing by constraint” as St Francis de Sales used to say. Here is the secret of hos affect on people, the full extent of which he himself perhaps did not realise.

All witnesses noted the living faith of this servant of God, a man of prayer, without ostentation. His faith was the radiant faith of a man always united with God, a true man of God, and in particular a man of the Eucharist.

When celebrating Mass or when praying, a kind of fervour emanated from him that could not go unnoticed. One confrere declared that: “seeing him make his great sign of the cross, everyone felt a timely reminder of God’s presence. His recollection at the altar was impressive.” Another Salesian recalls that “he made his genuflections to perfection with a courage, an expression of adoration that led to devotion.” The same person said that “He strengthened my faith.”

His vision of faith shone through in the confessional and in spiritual conversations. He communicated his faith. A man of hope, he relied on God and his Providence

at all times, keeping calm in the storm and spreading a sense of peace everywhere.

This deep faith was further refined in him during the last ten years of his life. He no longer had any responsibilities and could no longer read easily. He lived only on the essentials and testified to this with simplicity by welcoming all those who knew well that his semi-blindness did not prevent him from seeing clearly into their hearts. At the back of the chapel, his confessional was a place besieged by young people and neighbours from the valley.

3. "I did not come to be served…"

The image that witnesses have preserved of Fr Augustus is that of the servant of the Gospel, but in the most humble sense. Sweeping the courtyard, cleaning the pupils' toilets, washing the dishes, caring for and watching over the sick, spading the garden, raking the park, decorating the chapel, tying the children's shoes, combing their hair, nothing repulsed him and it was impossible to divert him from these humble exercises of charity. The "good father" Arribat, was more generous with concrete actions than with words: he willingly gave his room to the occasional visitor, who risked being less comfortably accommodated than him. His availability was permanent, of all times. His concern for cleanliness and dignified poverty did not leave him alone, because the house had to be cosy. As a man who made friends easily, he took advantage of his long trips to greet everyone and engage in conversation, even with people who hated priests.

Fr Arribat lived over thirty years at Navarre, in the house that Don Bosco himself wanted to place under the protection of St Joseph, head and servant of the Holy Family, a model of faith in hiddenness and discretion. In his solicitude for the material needs of the house and through his closeness to all the people dedicated to manual labour, peasants, gardeners, workers, handymen, kitchen or laundry people, this priest made people think of St Joseph, whose name he also bore. And did he not die on 19 March, the feast of St

Joseph?

4. An authentic Salesian educator

"Providence has entrusted me in a special way with the care of children," he said to sum up his specific vocation as a Salesian, a disciple of Don Bosco, at the service of the young, especially the most needy.

Fr Arribat had none of the particular qualities that easily impress young people outwardly. He was not a great sportsman, nor a brilliant intellectual, nor a talker who drew crowds, nor a musician, nor a man of the theatre or cinema, none of this! How to explain the influence he exerted on young people? His secret was none other than what he had learned from Don Bosco, who conquered his small world with three things considered fundamental in the education of youth: reason, religion and loving-kindness. As the "father and teacher of youth" he knew how to speak the language of reason with the young, to motivate, explain, persuade, convince his pupils, avoiding the impulses of passion and anger. He placed religion at the centre of his life and action, not in the sense of forced imposition, but in the luminous testimony of his relationship with God, Jesus and Mary. As for loving kindness, with which he won the hearts of young people, it is worth recalling about the servant of God what St Francis de Sales said: "You catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a barrel of vinegar."

Particularly authoritative is the testimony of Fr Peter Ricaldone, Don Bosco's future successor, who wrote after his canonical visit in 1923-1924: "Fr Augustus Arribat is a catechist, confessor and reads the conduct marks! He is a holy confrere. Only his kindness can make his various duties less incompatible'. Then he repeats his praise: "He is an excellent confrere, not too healthy. Because of his good manners he enjoys the confidence of the older young men who almost all go to him.".

One thing that was striking was the almost ceremonious respect he showed to everyone, but especially to

the children. He would call a little eight-year-old "Monsieur". One lady testified: "He respected the other so much that the other was almost forced to elevate himself to the dignity that was bestowed on him as a child of God, and all this without even talking about religion."

Open-faced and smiling, this son of St Francis de Sales and Don Bosco bothered no one. While his thin body and asceticism recalled the holy curé of Ars and Fr Rua, his smile and gentleness were typically Salesian. As one witness put it: "He was the most natural man in the world, full of humour, spontaneous in his reactions, young at heart."

His words, which were not those of a great orator, were effective because they emanated from the simplicity and fervour of his soul.

One of his former students testified: "In our children's heads, in our childhood conversations, after hearing the stories of the life of John Mary Vianney, we used to think of Fr Arribat as if he were the Holy Curé of Ars to us. The hours of catechism, presented in simple but true language, were followed with great attention. During Mass, the pews at the back of the chapel were always full. We had the impression that we were meeting God in his goodness and this marked our youth."

5. Fr Arribat an ecologist?

Here is an original trait to complete the picture of this seemingly ordinary figure. He was regarded almost as an ecologist before this term was widespread. A small farmer, he had learnt to deeply love and respect nature. His youthful compositions are full of freshness and very fine observations, with a touch of poetry. He spontaneously shared the work of this rural world, where he lived much of his long life.

Speaking of his love for animals, how many times was he seen as "the good father, with a box under his arm, full of breadcrumbs, laboriously making the path from the refectory to his doves with very painful little steps." An incredible fact for those who did not see it, says the person

who witnessed the scene, were the doves – as soon as they saw him, they came forward as if to welcome him. He opened the cage and immediately they came to him, some of them standing on his shoulders. “He spoke to them with words I cannot remember, but it was as if he knew them all. When a young boy brought him a baby sparrow that he had taken from the nest, he told him: “You must give it freedom”. A story is also told of a rather ferocious wolfhound which only he was able to tame, and which came to lie next to his coffin after his death.

Fr Augustus Arribat’s brief spiritual profile has shown us some of the spiritual features of the faces of saints he felt close to: the loving kindness of Don Bosco, the asceticism of Fr Rua, the gentleness of St Francis de Sales, the priestly piety of the holy curé of Ars, the love of nature of St Francis of Assisi and the constant and faithful work of St Joseph.

Educating the Human Heart with Saint Francis de Sales

St. Francis de Sales places the heart at the centre of human formation, as the seat of will, love, and freedom. Drawing from the biblical tradition and engaging with the philosophy and science of his time, the Bishop of Geneva identifies the will as the “master faculty” capable of governing passions and senses, while affections—especially love—fuel its inner dynamism. Salesian education therefore aims to transform desires, choices, and resolutions into a path of self-mastery, where gentleness and firmness come together to guide the whole person toward the good.

At the centre and pinnacle of the human person, Saint Francis

de Sales places the heart, to the point that he says: “Whoever conquers the heart of a man conquers the whole man.” In Salesian anthropology, one cannot help but notice the abundant use of the term and concept of the *heart*. This is even more surprising because among the humanists of the time, steeped in languages and thoughts drawn from antiquity, there does not seem to be a particular emphasis on this symbol.

On one hand, this phenomenon can be explained by the common, universal use of the noun “*heart*” to designate the inner self of a person, especially in reference to their sensitivity. On the other hand, Francis de Sales owes much to the biblical tradition, which considers the heart as the seat of the highest faculties of man, such as love, will, and intelligence.

To these considerations, one might perhaps add contemporary anatomical research concerning the *heart* and blood circulation. What is important for us is to clarify the meaning that Francis de Sales attributed to the heart, starting from his vision of the human person whose centre and apex are will, love, and freedom.

The Will, the Master Faculty

Alongside the faculties of the spirit, such as intellect and memory, we remain within the realm of knowing. Now it is time to delve into that of acting. As Saint Augustine and certain philosophers like Duns Scotus had already done, Francis de Sales assigns the first place to the will, probably under the influence of his Jesuit teachers. It is the will that must govern all the “powers” of the soul.

It is significant that the *Teotimo* begins with the chapter titled: “How, because of the beauty of human nature, God gave the will the governance of all the faculties of the soul.” Quoting Saint Thomas, Francis de Sales affirms that man has “full power over every kind of accident and event” and that “the wise man, that is, the man who follows reason, will become the absolute master of the stars.” Along with intellect and memory, the will is “the third soldier of our spirit and

the strongest of all, because nothing can overpower the free will of man; even God who created it does not want to force or violate it in any way."
However, the will exercises its authority in very different ways, and the obedience due to it is considerably variable. Thus, some of our limbs, not hindered from moving, obey the will without problem. We open and close our mouths, move our tongues, hands, feet, eyes at our pleasure and as much as we want. The will exerts power over the functioning of the five senses, but it is an indirect power: to not see with the eyes, I must turn them away or close them; to practice abstinence, I must command the hands not to bring food to the mouth.
The will can and must dominate the sensitive appetite with its twelve passions. Although it tends to behave like "a rebellious, seditious, restless subject," the will can and must sometimes dominate it, even at the cost of a long struggle. The will also has power over the higher faculties of the spirit, memory, intellect, and imagination, because it is the will that decides to apply the spirit to this or that object and to divert it from this or that thought; but it cannot regulate and make them obey without difficulty, since the imagination is extremely "changeable and fickle."

But how does the will function? The answer is relatively easy if one refers to the Salesian model of meditation or mental prayer, with its three parts: "considerations," "affections," and "resolutions." The first consist of reflecting and meditating on a good, a truth, a value. Such reflection normally produces affections, that is, strong desires to acquire and possess that good or value, and these affections are capable of "moving the will." Finally, the will, once "moved," produces the "resolutions."

The "affections" that move the will

The will, being considered by Francis de Sales as an "appetite," is an "affective faculty." But it is a rational appetite, not a sensitive or sensual one. The appetite

produces motions, and while those of the sensitive appetite are ordinarily called “passions,” those of the will are called “affections,” as they “*press*” or “*move*” the will. The author of the *Teotimo* also calls the former “passions of the body” and the latter “affections of the heart.” Moving from the sensitive realm to the rational one, the twelve passions of the soul transform into reasonable affections.

In the different meditation models proposed in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, the author invites Filotea, through a series of vivid and meaningful expressions, to cultivate all forms of voluntary affections: *love* of the good (“turn one’s heart toward,” “become attached,” “embrace,” “cling,” “join,” “unite”); *hatred* of evil (“detest,” “break every bond,” “trample”); *desire* (“aspire,” “implore,” “invoke,” “beg”); *flight* (“despise,” “separate,” “distance,” “remove,” “abjure”); *hope* (“come on then! Oh my heart!”); *despair* (“oh! my unworthiness is great!”); *joy* (“rejoice,” “take pleasure”); *sadness* (“grieve,” “be confused,” “lower oneself,” “humble oneself”); *anger* (“reproach,” “push away,” “root out”); *fear* (“tremble,” “frighten the soul”); *courage* (“encourage,” “strengthen”); and finally *triumph* (“exalt,” “glorify”).

The Stoics, deniers of the passions—but wrongly—admitted the existence of these reasonable affections, which they called “*eupathies*” or good passions. They affirmed “that the wise man did not lust, but willed; that he did not feel joy, but gladness; that he was not subject to fear, but was prudent and cautious; therefore, he was driven only by reason and according to reason.”

Recognizing the role of affections in the decision-making process seems indispensable. It is significant that the meditation intended to culminate in resolutions reserves a central role for them. In certain cases, explains the author of the Filotea, one can almost omit or shorten the considerations, but the affections must never be missing

because they are what motivate the resolutions. When a good affection arises, he wrote, “one must let it run free and not insist on following the method I have indicated,” because considerations are made only to excite the affection.

Love, the First and Principal “Affection”

For Saint Francis de Sales, love always appears first both in the list of passions and in that of affections. What is love? Jean-Pierre Camus asked his friend, the bishop of Geneva, who replied: “Love is the first passion of our sensitive appetite and the first affection of the rational one, which is the will; since our will is nothing other than the love of good, and love is willing the good.”

Love governs the other affections and enters the heart first: “Sadness, fear, hope, hatred, and the other affections of the soul do not enter the heart unless love drags them along.” Following Saint Augustine, for whom “to live is to love,” the author of the Teotimo explains that the other eleven affections that populate the human heart depend on love: “Love is the life of our heart […]. All our affections follow our love, and according to it *we desire, delight, hope and despair, fear, encourage ourselves, hate, flee, grieve, get angry, feel triumphant.”*

Curiously, the will has primarily a passive dimension, while love is the active power that moves and stirs. The will does not decide unless it is moved by a predominant stimulus: love. Taking the example of iron attracted by a magnet, one must say that the will is the iron and love the magnet.

To illustrate the dynamism of love, the author of the *Teotimo* also uses the image of a tree. With botanical precision, he analyses the “five main parts” of love, which is “like a beautiful tree, whose root is the suitability of the will with the good, the stump is pleasure, the trunk is tension, the branches are the searches, attempts, and other efforts, but only the fruit is union and enjoyment.”

Love imposes itself even on the will. Such is the power of

love that, for the one who loves, nothing is difficult, “for love nothing is impossible.” Love is as strong as death, repeats Francis de Sales with the *Song of Songs*; or rather, love is stronger than death. Upon reflection, man is worth only for love, and all human powers and faculties, especially the will, tend toward it: “God wants man only for the soul, and the soul only for the will, and the will only for love.”

To explain his thought, the author of the *Teotimo* resorts to the image of the relationship between man and woman, as it was codified and lived in his time. The young woman, from among the suitors can choose the one she likes best. But after marriage, she loses her freedom and, from mistress, becomes subject to the authority of her husband, remaining bound to the one she herself chose. Thus, the will, which has the choice of love, after embracing one, remains subject to it.

The struggle of the will for inner freedom

To will is to choose. As long as one is a child, one is still entirely dependent and incapable of choosing, but as one grows up, things soon change and choices become unavoidable. Children are neither good nor bad because they are not able to choose between good and evil. During childhood, they walk like those leaving a city and for a while go straight ahead; but after a while, they discover that the road splits in two directions; it is up to them to choose the right or left path at will, to go where they want.

Usually, choices are difficult because they require giving up one good for another. Typically, the choice must be made between what one feels and what one wants, because there is a great difference between feeling and consenting. The young man tempted by a “loose woman,” as Saint Jerome speaks of, had his imagination “exceedingly occupied by such a voluptuous presence,” but he overcame the trial with a pure act of superior will. The will, besieged on all sides and pushed to give its consent, resisted sensual passion.

Choice also arises in the face of other passions and

affections: “Trample underfoot your sensations, distrusts, fears, aversions,” advises Francis de Sales to someone he guided, asking them to side with “inspiration and reason against instinct and aversion.” Love uses the strength of the will to govern all faculties and all passions. It will be an “armed love,” and such armed love will subdue our passions. This free will “resides in the highest and most spiritual part of the soul” and “depends on nothing but God and oneself; and when all other faculties of the soul are lost and subjected to the enemy, only it remains master of itself so as not to consent in any way.”

However, choice is not only about the goal to be reached but also about the intention that governs the action. This is an aspect to which Francis de Sales is particularly sensitive because it touches on the quality of acting. Indeed, the pursued end gives meaning to the action. One can decide to perform an act for many reasons. Unlike animals, “man is so master of his human and reasonable actions as to perform them all for an end”; he can even change the natural end of an action by adding a secondary end, “as when, besides the intention to help the poor to whom alms are given, he adds the intention to oblige the indigent to do the same.” Among pagans, intentions were rarely disinterested, and in us, intentions can be tainted “by pride, vanity, temporal interest, or some other bad motive.” Sometimes “we pretend to want to be last and sit at the end of the table, but to pass with more honour to the head of the table.”

“Let us then purify, Teotimo, while we can, all our intentions,” asks the author of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Good intention “animates” the smallest actions and simple daily gestures. Indeed, “we reach perfection not by doing many things, but by doing them with a pure and perfect intention.” One must not lose heart because “one can always correct one’s intention, purify it, and improve it.”

The fruit of the will is “resolutions”

After highlighting the passive character of the

will, whose first property consists in being drawn toward the good presented by reason, it is appropriate to show its active aspect. Saint Francis de Sales attaches great importance to the distinction between affective will and effective will, as well as between affective love and effective love. Affective love resembles a father's love for the younger son, "a little charming child still a baby, very gentle," while the love shown to the elder son, "a grown man now, a good and noble soldier," is of another kind. "The latter is loved with effective love, while the little one is loved with affective love."

Similarly, speaking of the "steadfastness of the will," the bishop of Geneva states that one cannot be content with "sensible steadfastness"; an "effective steadfastness" located in the higher part of the spirit is necessary. The time comes when one must no longer "speculate with reasoning," but "harden the will." "Whether our soul is sad or joyful, overwhelmed by sweetness or bitterness, at peace or disturbed, bright or dark, tempted or calm, full of pleasure or disgust, immersed in dryness or tenderness, burned by the sun or refreshed by dew," it does not matter; a strong will is not easily diverted from its purposes. "Let us remain firm in our purposes, inflexible in our resolutions," asks the author of *Filotea*. It is the master faculty on which the value of the person depends: "The whole world is worth less than one soul, and a soul is worth nothing without our good purposes."

The noun "resolution" indicates a decision reached at the end of a process involving reasoning with its capacity to discern and the heart, understood as an affectivity moved by an attractive good. In the "authentic declaration" that the author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* invites *Filotea* to pronounce, it reads: "This is my will, my intention, and my decision, inviolable and irrevocable, a will that I confess and confirm without reservations or exceptions." A meditation that does not lead to concrete acts would be useless.

In the ten *Meditations* proposed as a model in the first part of *Filotea*, we find frequent expressions such as: "I want," "I

no longer want," "yes, I will follow inspirations and advice," "I will do everything possible," "I want to do this or that," "I will make this or that effort," "I will do this or that thing," "I choose," "I want to take part," or "I want to take the required care."
The will of Francis de Sales often assumes a passive aspect; here, however, it reveals all its extremely active dynamism. It is therefore not without reason that one has spoken of Salesian voluntarism.

Francis de Sales, educator of the human heart

Francis de Sales has been considered an "admirable educator of the will." To say he was an admirable educator of the human heart means roughly the same thing but with the addition of an affective nuance, characteristic of the Salesian conception of the heart. As we have seen, he neglected no component of the human being: the body with its senses, the soul with its passions, the spirit with its faculties, particularly intellectual. But what matters most to him is the human heart, about which he wrote to a correspondent: "It is therefore necessary to cultivate with great care this beloved heart and spare nothing that can be useful to its happiness."
Now, the human heart is "restless," according to Saint Augustine's saying, because it is full of unfulfilled desires. It seems never to have "rest or tranquillity." Francis de Sales then proposes an education of desires as well. A. Ravier also spoke of a "discernment or a politics of desire." Indeed, the main enemy of the will "is the quantity of desires we have for this or that thing. In short, our will is so full of demands and projects that very often it does nothing but waste time considering them one after another or even all together, instead of getting to work to realize the most useful one."
A good teacher knows that to lead his pupil toward the proposed goal, whether knowledge or virtue, it is essential to present a project that mobilizes his energies. Francis de Sales proves to be a master in the art of motivation, as he

teaches his “daughter,” Jeanne de Chantal, one of his favourite maxims: “One must do everything for love and nothing by force.” In the *Teotimo*, he states that “joy opens the heart as sadness closes it.” Love is indeed the life of the heart.

However, strength must not be lacking. To the young man about to “set sail on the vast sea of the world,” the bishop of Geneva advised “a vigorous heart” and “a noble heart,” capable of governing desires. Francis de Sales wants a sweet and peaceful heart, pure, indifferent, a “heart stripped of affections” incompatible with the vocation, a “right” heart, “relaxed and without any constraint.” He does not like the “tenderness of heart” that amounts to self-seeking and instead requires “firmness of heart” in action. “To a strong heart, nothing is impossible,” he writes to a lady, encouraging her not to abandon “the course of holy resolutions.” He wants a “manly heart” and at the same time a heart “docile, malleable, and submissive, yielding to all that is permitted and ready to take on every commitment out of obedience and charity”; a “sweet heart toward others and humble before God,” “nobly proud” and “perpetually humble,” “sweet and peaceful.”

Ultimately, the education of the will aims at full self-mastery, which Francis de Sales expresses through an image: to take the heart in hand, to possess the heart or soul. “The great joy of man, *Filotea*, is to possess his own soul; and the more patience becomes perfect, the more perfectly we possess our soul.” This does not mean insensitivity, absence of passions or affections, but rather a striving for self-mastery. It is a path directed toward self-autonomy, guaranteed by the supremacy of the will, free and reasonable, but an autonomy governed by sovereign love.

Photo: Portrait of Saint Francis de Sales in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome. Oil painting by Roman artist Attilio Palombi, donated by Cardinal Lucido Maria Parocchi.

Educating the Faculties of Our Spirit with Saint Francis de Sales

St. Francis de Sales presents the spirit as the highest part of the soul, governed by intellect, memory, and will. At the heart of his pedagogy is the authority of reason, a "divine torch" that truly makes a person human and must guide, illuminate, and discipline passions, imagination, and the senses. To educate the spirit therefore means cultivating the intellect through study, meditation, and contemplation, exercising memory as a repository of received graces, and strengthening the will so that it consistently chooses good. From this harmony flow the cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance – which shape free, balanced individuals capable of genuine charity.

Francis de Sales considers the spirit as the higher part of the soul. Its faculties are the intellect, memory, and will. Imagination could be part of it to the extent that reason and will intervene in its functioning. The will, for its part, is the master faculty to which particular treatment should be reserved. The spirit makes humans, according to the classic definition, a "rational animal." "We are human only through reason," writes Francis de Sales. After "bodily graces," there are "gifts of the spirit," which should be the object of our reflections and our gratitude. Among these, the author of the *Philothea* distinguishes the gifts received from nature and those acquired through education:

Consider the gifts of the spirit; how many people in the world are foolish, furiously mad, mentally deficient. Why are you

not among them? God has favoured you. How many have been educated rudely and in the most extreme ignorance; but you, divine Providence has had you raised in a civil and honourable way.

Reason, "Divine Torch"

In an Exercise of Sleep or Spiritual Rest, composed in Padua when he was twenty-three years old, Francis proposed to meditate on an astonishing topic:

I will stop to admire the beauty of the reason that God has given to man, so that, illuminated and instructed by its marvellous splendour, he may hate vice and love virtue. Oh! Let us follow the shining light of this divine torch, because it is given to us for use to see where we must put our feet! Ah! If we let ourselves be guided by its dictates, we will rarely stumble; it will be difficult to hurt ourselves.

"Natural reason is a good tree that God has planted in us; the fruits that come from it can only be good," affirms the author of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. It is true that it is "gravely wounded and almost dead because of sin," but its exercise is not fundamentally impeded.

In the inner kingdom of man, "reason must be the queen, to whom all the faculties of our spirit, all our senses, and the body itself must remain absolutely subject." It is reason that distinguishes man from animal, so we must be careful not to imitate "the apes and monkeys that are always sullen, sad, and lamenting when the moon is missing; then, on the contrary, at the new moon, they jump, dance, and make all possible grimaces." It is necessary to make "the authority of reason" reign, Francis de Sales reiterates.

Between the upper part of the spirit, which must reign, and the lower part of our being, sometimes designated by Francis de Sales with the biblical term "flesh," the struggle sometimes becomes bitter. Each front has its allies.

The spirit, “fortress of the soul,” is accompanied “by three soldiers: the intellect, memory, and will.” Therefore, beware of the “flesh” that plots and seeks allies on the spot:

The flesh now uses the intellect, now the will, now the imagination, which, associating against reason, leave it free field, creating division and doing a bad service to reason. […] The flesh allures the will sometimes with pleasures, sometimes with riches; now it urges the imagination to make claims; now it arouses in the intellect a great curiosity, all under the pretext of good.

In this struggle, even when all the passions of the soul seem upset, nothing is lost as long as the spirit resists: “If these soldiers were faithful, the spirit would have no fear and would not give any weight to its enemies: like soldiers who, having sufficient ammunition, resist in the bastion of an impregnable fortress, despite the fact that the enemies are in the suburbs or have even already taken the city. It happened to the citadel of Nizza, before which the force of three great princes did not prevail against the resistance of the defenders.” The cause of all these inner lacerations is self-love. In fact, “our reasonings are ordinarily full of motivations, opinions, and considerations suggested by self-love, and this causes great conflicts in the soul.”

In the educative field, it is important to make the superiority of the spirit felt. “Here lies the principle of a human education,” says Father Lejeune, “to show the child, as soon as his reason awakens, what is beautiful and good, and to turn him away from what is bad; in this way, to create in his heart the habit of controlling his instinctive reflexes, instead of following them slavishly. It is thus, in fact, that this process of sensualisation is formed which makes him a slave to his spontaneous desires. At the moment of decisive choices, this habit of always yielding, without controlling oneself, to instinctive impulses can prove

catastrophic.”

The Intellect, “Eye of the Soul”

The intellect, a typically human and rational faculty, which allows us to know and understand, is often compared to sight. For example, we say: “I see,” to mean: “I understand.” For Francis de Sales, the intellect is “the eye of the soul”; hence his expression “the eye of your intellect.” The incredible activity of which it is capable makes it similar to “a worker, who, with hundreds of thousands of eyes and hands, like another Argus, performs more works than all the workers in the world, because there is nothing in the world that he is not able to represent.”

How does the human intellect work? Francis de Sales has precisely analysed the four operations of which it is capable: simple thought, study, meditation, and contemplation. Simple thought is exercised on a great diversity of things, without any purpose, “as flies do that land on flowers without wanting to extract any juice, but only because they meet them.” When the intellect passes from one thought to another, the thoughts that thus cram it are ordinarily “useless and harmful.” Study, on the contrary, aims to consider things “to know them, to understand them, and to speak well of them,” with the aim of “filling the memory,” as beetles do that “land on roses for no other purpose than to satiate themselves and fill their bellies.”

Francis de Sales could have stopped here, but he knew and recommended two other higher forms. While study aims to increase knowledge, meditation aims to “move the affections and, in particular, love”: “Let us fix our intellect on the mystery from which we hope to draw good affections,” like the dove that “coos holding its breath and, by the grumbling that it produces in its throat without letting the breath out, produces its typical song.”

The supreme activity of the intellect is contemplation, which consists in rejoicing in the good known through meditation and loved through such knowledge; this time

we resemble the little birds that frolic in the cage only to "please the master." With contemplation, the human spirit reaches its peak; the author of the *Treatise on the Love of God* affirms that reason "finally vivifies the intellect with contemplation."

Let us return to study, the intellectual activity that interests us more closely. "There is an old axiom of philosophers, according to which every man desires to know." Taking up this affirmation of Aristotle on his part, as well as the example of Plato, Francis de Sales intends to demonstrate that this constitutes a great privilege. What man wants to know is the truth. The truth is more beautiful than that "famous Helen, for whose beauty so many Greeks and Trojans died." The spirit is made for the search for truth: "Truth is the object of our intellect, which, consequently, discovering and knowing the truth of things, feels fully satisfied and content." When the spirit finds something new, it experiences an intense joy, and when one begins to find something beautiful, one is driven to continue the search, "like those who have found a gold mine and push themselves further and further to find even more of this precious metal." The amazement that the discovery produces is a powerful stimulus; "admiration, in fact, has given rise to philosophy and the careful search for natural things." Since God is the supreme truth, the knowledge of God is the supreme science that fills our spirit. It is he who "has given us the intellect to know him"; outside of him there are only "vain thoughts and useless reflections!"

Cultivating One's Intelligence

What characterizes man is the great desire to know. It was this desire that "induced the great Plato to leave Athens and run so far," and "induced these ancient philosophers to renounce their bodily comforts." Some even go so far as to fast diligently "in order to study better." Study, in fact, produces an intellectual pleasure, superior to sensual pleasures and difficult to stop: "Intellectual love,

finding unexpected contentment in union with its object, perfects its knowledge, continuing thus to unite with it, and uniting ever more, does not cease to continue to do so."

It is a matter of "illuminating the intellect well," striving to "purge" it from the darkness of "ignorance." He denounces "the dullness and indolence of spirit, which does not want to know what is necessary" and insists on the value of study and learning: "Study ever more, with diligence and humility," he wrote to a student. But it is not enough to "purge" the intellect of ignorance; it is also necessary to "embellish and adorn" it, to "wallpaper it with considerations." To know a thing perfectly, it is necessary to learn well, to dedicate time to "subjecting" the intellect, that is, to fixing it on one thing before moving on to another.

The young Francis de Sales applied his intelligence not only to studies and intellectual knowledge, but also to certain subjects essential to man's life on earth, and, in particular, to "consideration of the vanity of greatness, riches, honours, comforts, and voluptuous pleasures of this world"; to "consideration of the wickedness, abjection, and deplorable misery present in vice and sin," and to "knowledge of the excellence of virtue."

The human spirit is often distracted, forgets, and is content with vague or vain knowledge. Through meditation, not only on eternal truths, but also on the phenomena and events of the world, it is able to reach a more realistic and profound vision of reality. For this reason, in the *Meditations* proposed by the author to *Philothea*, there is dedicated a first part entitled *Considerations*.

To consider means to apply the mind to a precise object, to examine its different aspects carefully. Francis de Sales invites *Philothea* to "think," to "see," to examine the different "points," some of which deserve to be considered "separately." He urges her to see things in general and then to descend to particular cases. He wants her to examine the principles, causes, and consequences of a given truth, of a

given situation, as well as the circumstances that accompany it. It is also necessary to know how to "weigh" certain words or sentences, the importance of which risks escaping us, to consider them one by one, to compare them with each other.

As in everything, so in the desire to know there can be excesses and distortions. Beware of the vanity of false wise men: some, in fact, "for the little science they have, want to be honoured and respected by all, as if everyone should go to their school and have them as teachers: therefore, they are called pedants." Now, "science dishonours us when it swells us up and degenerates into pedantry." What ridiculousness to want to instruct Minerva, *Minervam docere*, the goddess of wisdom! "The plague of science is presumption, which swells spirits and makes them hydroponic, as are ordinarily the wise men of the world."

When it comes to problems that surpass us and fall within the realm of the mysteries of faith, it is necessary to "purify them from all curiosity;" we must "keep them well closed and covered in the face of such vain and foolish questions and curiosities." It is "intellectual purity," the "second modesty" or "inner modesty." Finally, one must know that the intellect can be mistaken and that there is the "sin of the intellect," such as that which Francis de Sales reproaches to the lady of Chantal, who had made a mistake by placing an exaggerated esteem in her director.

Memory and its "warehouses"

Like the intellect, so memory is a faculty of the spirit that arouses admiration. Francis de Sales compares it to a warehouse "that is worth more than those of Antwerp or Venice." Is it not said "*to store*" in memory? Memory is a soldier whose fidelity is very useful to us. It is a gift from God, declares the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*: God has given it to you "so that you may remember him," he says to *Philothea*, inviting her to flee "detestable and frivolous memories."

This faculty of the human spirit needs to be

trained. When he was a student in Padua, the young Francis exercised his memory not only in his studies, but also in his spiritual life, in which the memory of benefits received is a fundamental element:

First of all, I will dedicate myself to refreshing my memory with all the good motions, desires, affections, purposes, projects, feelings, and sweetnesses that the divine Majesty has inspired and made me experience in the past, considering its holy mysteries, the beauty of virtue, the nobility of its service, and an infinity of benefits that it has freely bestowed upon me; I will also put order in my memories about the obligations I have towards her for the fact that, by her holy grace, she has sometimes weakened my senses by sending me certain illnesses and infirmities, from which I have drawn great profit.

In difficulties and fears, it is indispensable to use it "to remember the promises" and to "remain firm trusting that everything will perish rather than the promises will fail." However, the memory of the past is not always good, because it can engender sadness, as happened to a disciple of St. Bernard, who was assailed by a bad temptation when he began "to remember the friends of the world, the relatives, the goods he had left." In certain exceptional circumstances of the spiritual life "it is necessary to purify it from the memory of perishable things and from worldly affairs and to forget for a certain time material and temporal things, although good and useful." In the moral field, to exercise virtue, the person who has felt offended will take a radical measure: "I remember too much the taunts and injuries, from now on I will lose the memory."

"We must have a just and reasonable spirit"

The capacities of the human spirit, in particular of the intellect and memory, are not destined only for glorious intellectual enterprises, but also and above all for

the conduct of life. To seek to know man, to understand life, and to define the norms concerning behaviours conforming to reason, these should be the fundamental tasks of the human spirit and its education. The central part of *Philothea*, which deals with the "exercise of virtues," contains, towards the end, a chapter that summarizes in a certain way the teaching of Francis de Sales on virtues: "We must have a just and reasonable spirit."

With finesse and a pinch of humour, the author denounces numerous bizarre, foolish, or simply unjust behaviours: "We accuse our neighbour for little, and we excuse ourselves for much more"; "we want to sell at a high price and buy cheaply"; "what we do for others always seems a lot to us, and what others do for us is nothing"; "we have a sweet, gracious, and courteous heart towards ourselves, and a hard, severe, and rigorous heart towards our neighbour"; "we have two weights: one to weigh our comforts with the greatest possible advantage for us, the other to weigh those of our neighbour with the greatest disadvantage that can be." To judge well, he advises *Philothea*, it is always necessary to put oneself in the shoes of one's neighbour: "Make yourself a seller in buying and a buyer in selling." Nothing is lost by living as "generous, noble, courteous people, with a regal, constant, and reasonable heart."

Reason is at the base of the edifice of education. Certain parents do not have a right mental attitude; in fact, "there are virtuous children whom fathers and mothers can hardly bear because they have this or that defect in the body; there are instead vicious ones continuously pampered, because they have this or that beautiful physical gift." There are educators and leaders who indulge in preferences. "Keep the balance straight between your daughters," he recommended to a superior of the Visitation nuns, so that "natural gifts do not make you distribute affections and Favors unjustly." And he added: "Beauty, good grace, and gentle speech often confer a great force of attraction on people who live according to their natural inclinations; charity has as its object true

virtue and the beauty of the heart, and extends to all without particularisms."

But it is above all youth that runs the greatest risks, because if "self-love usually distances us from reason," this perhaps happens even more in young people tempted by vanity and ambition. The reason of a young person risks being lost above all when he lets himself "be taken by infatuations." Therefore, attention, writes the bishop to a young man, "not to allow your affections to prevent judgment and reason in the choice of subjects to love; since, once it has started running, affection drags judgment, as it would drag a slave, to very deplorable choices, of which he might repent very soon." He also explained to the Visitation nuns that "our thoughts are usually full of reasons, opinions, and considerations suggested by self-love, which causes great conflicts in the soul."

Reason, source of the four cardinal virtues

Reason resembles the river of paradise, "which God makes flow to irrigate the whole man in all his faculties and activities." It is divided into four branches corresponding to the four virtues that philosophical tradition calls cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

Prudence "inclines our intellect to truly discern the evil to be avoided and the good to be done." It consists in "discerning which are the most appropriate means to reach the good and virtue." Beware of passions that risk deforming our judgment and causing the ruin of prudence! Prudence does not oppose simplicity: we will be, jointly, "prudent as serpents so as not to be deceived; simple as doves so as not to deceive anyone."

Justice consists in "rendering to God, to our neighbour, and to ourselves what is due." Francis de Sales begins with justice towards God, connected with the virtue of religion, "by which we render to God the respect, honour, homage, and submission due to him as our sovereign Lord and first principle." Justice towards parents entails the duty of

piety, which “extends to all the offices that can legitimately be rendered to them, whether in honour or in service.”

The virtue of fortitude helps to “overcome the difficulties that are encountered in doing good and in rejecting evil.” It is very necessary, because the sensitive appetite is “truly a rebellious, seditious, turbulent subject.” When reason dominates the passions, anger gives way to gentleness, a great ally of reason. Fortitude is often accompanied by magnanimity, “a virtue that pushes and inclines us to perform actions of great importance.”

Finally, temperance is indispensable “to repress the disordered inclinations of sensuality,” to “govern the appetite of greed,” and to “curb the passions connected.” In effect, if the soul becomes too passionate about a pleasure and a sensible joy, it degrades itself, rendering itself incapable of higher joys.

In conclusion, the four cardinal virtues are like the manifestations of this natural light that reason provides us. By practicing these virtues, reason exercises “its superiority and the authority it has to regulate sensual appetites.”

Educating our emotions with Saint Francis de Sales

Modern psychology has demonstrated the importance and influence of emotions in the life of the human psyche, and everyone knows that emotions are particularly strong during youth. But there is hardly talk anymore of the “passions of the soul,” which classical anthropology has carefully analysed, as evidenced by the work of Francis de Sales, and,

in particular, when he writes that "the soul, as such, is the source of the passions." In his vocabulary, the term "emotion" did not yet appear with the connotations we attribute to it. Instead, he would say that our "passions" in certain circumstances are "moved." In the educational field, the question that arises concerns the attitude that is appropriate to have in the face of these involuntary manifestations of our sensibility, which always have a physiological component.

"I am a poor man and nothing more"

All those who knew Francis de Sales noted his great sensitivity and emotionality. The blood would rush to his head and his face would turn red. We know of his outbursts of anger against the "heretics" and the courtesan of Padua. Like any good Savoyard, he was "usually calm and gentle, but capable of terrible outbursts of anger; a volcano under the snow." His sensitivity was very much alive. On the occasion of the death of his little sister Jeanne, he wrote to Jane Frances de Chantal, who was also dismayed:

Alas, my Daughter: I am a poor man and nothing more. My heart has been touched more than I could ever imagine; but the truth is that your grief as well as my mother's have contributed a great deal to this: I was afraid for your heart as well as my mother's.

At the death of his mother, he did not hide that the separation had made him shed tears. He certainly had the courage to close her eyes and mouth and give her a last kiss, but after that, he confided to Jane Frances de Chantal, "my heart swelled greatly, and I wept for this good mother more than I had ever done since the day I embraced the priesthood." In fact, he did not systematically restrain from manifesting his feelings externally. He accepted them serenely given his humanistic approach. A precious testimony from Jane Frances de Chantal informs us that "our saint was not exempt from feelings and outbursts of passions, and did not want to be

freed from them."

It is commonly known that the passions of the soul influence the body, causing external reactions to their internal movements: "We externalize and manifest our passions and the movements that our souls have in common with animals through the eyes, with movements of the eyebrows, forehead and entire face." Thus, it is not in our power not to feel fear in certain circumstances: "It is as if one were to say to a person who sees a lion or a bear coming towards them: Do not be afraid." Now, "when feeling fear, one becomes pale, and when we are called to account for something that displeases us, our blood rushes to our faces and we become red, or feeling displeasure can also make tears well up in our eyes." Children, "if they see a dog barking, they immediately start screaming and do not stop until they are near their mother."

When Ms. de Chantal meets her husband's murderer, how will her "heart" react? "I know that, without a doubt, that heart of yours will throb and feel shaken, and your blood will boil," her spiritual director predicts, adding this lesson of wisdom: "God makes us see with our own eyes, through these emotions, how true it is that we are made of flesh, bone, and spirit."

The twelve passions of the soul

In ancient times, Virgil, Cicero, and Boethius broke the passions of the soul down to four, while Saint Augustine knew only one dominant passion, love, articulated in turn into four secondary passions: "Love that tends to possess what it loves is called cupidity or *desire*; when it achieves and possesses it, it is called *joy*; when it flees what is contrary to it, it is called *fear*; if it happens to lose it and feels the weight of it, it is called *sadness*."

In *Philothea*, Francis de Sales points out seven, comparing them to the strings that the luthier must tune from time to time: *love*, *hate*, *desire*, *fear*, *hope*, *sadness*, and *joy*.

In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, on the other

hand, he lists up to twelve. It is surprising that “this multitude of passions […] is left in our souls!” The first five have as their object the good, that is, everything that our sensibility makes us spontaneously seek and appreciate as good for us (we think of the fundamental goods of life, health, and joy):

*If good be considered in itself according to its natural goodness, it excites **love**, the first and principal passion; if good be regarded as absent, it provokes us to **desire**; if being desired we think we are able to obtain it, we enter into hope; if we think we are unable, we feel **despair**; but when we possess it as present, it moves us to **joy**.*

The other seven passions are those that make us spontaneously react negatively to everything that appears to us as evil to be avoided and fought against (we think of illness, suffering, and death):

*As soon as we discover evil, we **hate** it; if it is absent, we **fly** it; if we cannot avoid it, we **fear** it; if we think we can avoid it, we grow bold and **courageous**; but if we feel it present, we grieve, and then **anger** and wrath suddenly rush forth to reject and repel the evil or at least to take vengeance for it. If we cannot succeed we remain in **grief.** But ifwe repulse or avenge it we feel satisfaction and satiation, which is a pleasure of **triumph**, for as the possession of good gladdens the heart, so the victory over evil exalts the spirits.*

As can be noted, to the eleven passions of the soul proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, Francis de Sales adds victory over evil, which “exalts the spirits” and provokes the joy of triumph.

Love, the first and main passion

As was easy to foresee, *love* is presented as the “first and main passion”: “Love comes first, among the

passions of the soul: it is the king of all the outbursts of the heart, it transforms everything else into itself and makes us be what it loves." "Love is the first passion of the soul," he repeats.

It manifests itself in a thousand ways and its language is very diversified. In fact, "it is not expressed only in words, but also with the eyes, with gestures, and with actions. As far as the eyes are concerned, the tears that flow from them are proof of love." There are also the "sighs of love." But these manifestations of love are different. The most habitual and superficial is the emotion or passion, which puts sensitivity in motion almost involuntarily.

And *hate*? We spontaneously hate what appears to be evil. It should be noted that among people there are forms of hatred and instinctive, irrational, unconscious aversions, like those that exist between a mule and a horse, or between a vine and cabbages. We are not responsible for these at all, because they do not depend on our will.

Desire and flight

Desire is another fundamental reality of our soul. Everyday life triggers multiple desires, because desire consists in the "hope of a future good." The most common natural desires are those that "concern goods, pleasures, and honours."

On the other hand, we spontaneously flee from the evils of life. The human will of Christ pushed Him to *flee* from the pains and sufferings of passion; hence the trembling, anguish, and sweating of blood.

Hope and despair

Hope concerns a good that one believes can be obtained. Philothea is invited to examine how she behaved as regards "hope, perhaps too often placed in the world and in creatures; and too little in God and eternal things."

As for *despair*, look for example at that of the "youth who aspire to perfection": "As soon as they encounter a

difficulty along their path, one immediately gets a feeling of disappointment, which pushes him/her to make many complaints, so as to give the impression of being troubled by great torments. Pride and vanity cannot tolerate the slightest defect, without immediately feeling strongly disturbed to the point of despair."

Joy and sadness

Joy is "satisfaction for the good obtained." Thus, "when we meet those we love, it is not possible not to feel moved by joy and happiness." The possession of a good infallibly produces a complacency or joy, as the law of gravity moves the stone: "It is the weight that shakes things, moves them, and stops them: it is the weight that moves the stone and drags it down as soon as the obstacles are removed; it is the same weight that makes it continue the movement downwards; finally, it is always the same weight that makes it stop and settle when it has reached its place."

Sometimes joy comes with laughter. "Laughter is a passion that erupts without us wanting it and it is not in our power to restrain it, all the more so as we laugh and are moved to laugh by unforeseen circumstances." Did Our Lord laugh? The bishop of Geneva thinks that Jesus smiled when He wanted to: "Our Lord could not laugh, because for Him nothing was unforeseen, since He knew everything before it happened; He could, of course, smile, but He did so deliberately."

The young Visitation nuns, sometimes seized by uncontrollable laughter when a companion beat her chest or a reader made a mistake during the reading at the table, needed a little lesson on this point: "Fools laugh at every situation, because everything surprises them, not being able to foresee anything; but the wise do not laugh so lightly, because they employ reflection more, which makes them foresee the things that are to happen." That said, it is not a defect to laugh at some imperfection, "provided one does not go too far."

Sadness is "sorrow for pain that is present." It

“disturbs the soul, provokes immoderate fears, makes one feel disgust for prayer, weakens and lulls the brain to sleep, deprives the soul of wisdom, resolution, judgment, and courage, and annihilates strength”; it is “like a harsh winter that ruins all the beauty of the earth and makes all the animals indolent; because it takes away all sweetness from the soul and makes it as lazy and impotent in all its faculties.”

In certain cases, it can lead to weeping: a father, when sending his son to court or to study, cannot refrain “from crying when saying goodbye to him”; and “a daughter, although she has married according to the wishes of her father and mother, moves them to tears when receiving their blessing.” Alexander the Great wept when he learned that there were other lands that he would never be able to conquer: “Like a child who whines for an apple that is denied him, that Alexander, whom historians call the Great, more foolish than a child, begins to weep warm tears, because it seems impossible for him to conquer the other worlds.”

Courage and fear

Fear refers to a “future evil.” Some, wanting to be brave, hang around somewhere during the night, but “as soon as they hear a stone fall or the rustle of a mouse running away, they start screaming: My God! – What is it, they are asked, what did you find? – I heard a noise. – But what? – I don’t know.” It is necessary to be wary, because “fear is a greater evil than the evil itself.”

As for *courage*, before being a virtue, it is a feeling that supports us in the face of difficulties that would normally overwhelm us. Francis de Sales experienced it when undertaking a long and risky visit to his mountain diocese:

I was about to mount my horse for the pastoral visit, which would last about five months. […] I left full of courage, and, since that morning, I felt a great joy in being able to begin, although, before, for several days, I had experienced vain

fears and sadness.

Anger and the feeling of triumph

As for *anger* or *wrath*, we cannot prevent ourselves from being seized by it in certain circumstances: “If they tell me that someone has spoken ill of me, or that I am being treated with any other form of discourtesy, I immediately fly into a rage and there isn’t a vein in my body that isn’t twisting, because the blood is boiling.” Even in the Visitation monasteries, occasions for irritation and anger were not lacking, and the attacks of the “irascible appetite” were felt to be overwhelming. There is nothing strange in this: “To prevent the resentment of anger from awakening in us and the blood from rising to our heads will never be possible; we will be fortunate if we can reach this perfection a quarter of an hour before we die.” It can also happen “that anger upsets and turns my poor heart upside down, that my head smokes from all sides, that the blood boils like a pot on the fire.”

The satisfaction of anger, for having overcome evil, provokes the exhilarating emotion of triumph. He who triumphs “cannot contain the transport of his joy.”

In search of balance

Passions and outbursts of the soul are most often independent of our will: “It is not expected of you to not have no passions; it is not in your power,” he said to the Daughters of the Visitation, adding: “What can a person do to have such and such a temperament, subject to this or that passion? Everything therefore lies in the actions that we derive from it by means of that movement, which depends on our will.”

One thing is certain, moods and passions make a person an extremely variable being in terms of one’s psychological “temperature,” just like climatic variations. “His/her life flows on this earth like water, fluctuating and undulating in a perpetual variety of movements.” “Today one

will be excessively happy, and, immediately after, exaggeratedly sad. In carnival time one will see manifestations of joy and cheerfulness, with foolish and crazy actions, then, immediately afterwards, you will see such exaggerated signs of sadness and boredom so as to make one think that these are terrible and, apparently, irremediable things. Another, at present, will be too confident and nothing will frighten him, and, immediately afterwards, he will be seized by an anguish that will sink him down to the ground."

Jane de Chantal's spiritual director identified the different "seasons of the soul" experienced by her at the beginning of her fervent life very well:

I see that all the seasons of the year are in your soul. Now you feel the winter through all the barrenness, distractions, heaviness and boredom; now the dew of the month of May with the scent of the little holy flowers, and now the warmth of the desires to please our good God. Only autumn remains of which, as you say, you do not see many fruits. Well, it often happens that, threshing the wheat or pressing the grapes, one finds a more abundant fruit than the harvests and the vintage promised. You would like for it to always be spring or summer; but no, my Daughter: the alternation of the seasons must take place inside as well as outside. Only in Heaven will everything be spring as regards beauty, everything will be autumn as regards enjoyment and everything will be summer as regards love. Up there, there will no longer be winter, but here it is necessary for the exercise of self-denial and the thousand small beautiful virtues, which are exercised in the time of aridity.

The health of the soul as well as that of the body cannot consist in eliminating these four moods, rather in obtaining a "invariability of moods." When one passion predominates over the others, it causes diseases of the soul; and since it is extremely difficult to regulate it, it follows that people are bizarre and variable, so that nothing else is

discerned among them but fantasies, inconstancy and stupidity.

What is good about passions is that they allow us "to exercise the will to acquire virtues and spiritual vigilance." Despite certain manifestations, in which one must "suffocate and repress the passions," for Francis de Sales it is not about eliminating them, which is impossible, rather controlling them as much as possible, that is, moderating them and orienting them to an end that is good.

It is not, therefore, about pretending to ignore our psychic manifestations, as if they did not exist (which once again is impossible), but of "constantly watching over one's heart and one's spirit to keep the passions in order and under the control of reason; otherwise there will only be originality and unequal behaviours." Philothea will not be happy, if not when she has "sedated and pacified so many passions that [they] caused [her] restlessness."

Having a constant spirit is one of the best ornaments of Christian life and one of the most lovable means of acquiring and preserving the grace of God, and also of edifying one's neighbour. "Perfection, therefore, does not consist in the absence of passions, but in their correct regulation; the passions are to the heart as the strings to a harp: they must be tuned so that we can say: We will praise you with the harp."

When passions make us lose inner and outer balance, two methods are possible: "opposing contrary passions to them, or opposing greater passions of the same kind." If I am disturbed by the "desire for riches or voluptuous pleasure," I will fight such passion with contempt and flight, or I will aspire to higher riches and pleasures. I can fight physical fear with the opposite, which is courage, or by developing a healthy fear regarding the soul.

The love of God, for its part, imprints a true conversion on the passions, changing their natural orientation and presenting them with a spiritual end. For example, "the appetite for food is made very spiritual if, before satisfying it, one gives it the motive of love: and no, Lord, it is not

to please this poor belly, nor to satisfy this appetite that I go to the table, but, according to your Providence, to maintain this body that you have made subject to such misery; yes, Lord, because it has pleased you so."

The transformation thus operated will resemble an "artifice" used in alchemy that changes iron into gold. "O holy and sacred alchemy! – writes the Bishop of Geneva -, O divine powder of fusion, with which all the metals of our passions, affections and actions are changed into the purest gold of heavenly delight!".

Moods of the soul, passions and imaginations are deeply rooted in the human soul: they represent an exceptional resource for the life of the soul. It will be the task of the higher faculties, reason and above all will, to moderate and govern them. A difficult undertaking: Francis de Sales accomplished it successfully, because, according to what the mother of Chantal affirms, "he possessed such absolute dominion over his passions as to render them obedient as slaves; and in the end they almost no longer appeared."

Educating the body and its 5 senses with Saint Francis de Sales

A good number of ancient Christian ascetics often considered the body as an enemy, whose decay had to be confronted, in fact, as if it were an object of contempt and given no consideration. Numerous spiritual men of the Middle Ages did not care for the body except to inflict penances upon it. In most schools of the time, nothing was provided to allow "brother donkey" to rest.

For Calvino, human nature that was totally corrupted by original sin, could only be an “outhouse.” On the opposite front, numerous Renaissance writers and artists exalted the body to the point of paying it cult, in which sensuality played a significant role. Rabelais, for his part, glorified the bodies of his giants and took pleasure in showcasing even their less noble organic functions.

Salesian realism

Between the divinisation of the body and its contempt, Francis de Sales offers a realistic view of human nature. At the end of the first meditation on the theme of the creation of man, “the first being of the visible world,” the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* puts on the lips of Philothea this statement that seems to summarise his thought: “I want to feel honoured for the being that he has given me.” Certainly, the body is destined for death. With stark realism, the author describes the soul’s farewell to the body, which it will leave “pale, livid, disfigured, horrid, and foul-smelling,” but this does not constitute a reason to neglect and unjustly denigrate it while one is alive. Saint Bernard was wrong when he announced to those who wanted to follow him “that they should abandon their bodies and go to him only in spirit.” Physical evils should not lead to hating the body: moral evil is far worse.

We surely do not find any oblivion or overshadowing of bodily phenomena in Francis de Sales, as when he speaks of various forms of diseases or when he evokes the manifestations of human love. In a chapter of the *Treatise on the Love of God* titled: “That love tends to union,” he writes, for example, that “one mouth is applied to another in kissing to testify that we would desire to pour out one soul into the other, to unite them reciprocally in a perfect union.” This attitude of Francis de Sales towards the body already provoked scandalised reactions in his time. When Philothea appeared, an Avignonese religious publicly criticised this “little book,” tearing it apart and accusing its author of being a “corrupted

and corrupting doctor." An enemy of excessive modesty, Francis de Sales was not yet aware of the reserve and fears that would emerge in later times. Do medieval customs survive in him or is it simply a manifestation of his "biblical" taste? In any case, there is nothing in him comparable to the trivialities of the "infamous" Rabelais.

The most esteemed natural gifts are beauty, strength, and health. Regarding beauty, Francis de Sales expressed himself while speaking of Saint Brigid: "She was born in Scotland; she was a very beautiful girl, since the Scots are naturally beautiful, and in that country, one finds the most beautiful creatures that exist." Let us also think of the repertoire of images regarding the physical perfections of the bridegroom and the bride, taken from the *Song of Solomon*. Although the representations are sublimated and transferred to a spiritual register, they remain indicative of an atmosphere in which the natural beauty of man and woman is exalted. There were attempts to have him suppress the chapter of *Theotimus* on kissing, in which he demonstrates that "love tends to union," but he always refused to do so. In any case, external beauty is not the most important: the beauty of the daughter of Zion is internal.

The close connection between body and soul

First of all, Francis de Sales affirms that the body is "a part of our person." With a hint of tenderness, a personified soul can also say: "This flesh is my dear half, it is my sister, it is my companion, born with me, nourished with me."

The bishop was very attentive to the existing bond between body and soul, between the health of the body and that of the soul. Thus, he writes of a person under his care, who was in poor health, that the health of her body "depends a lot on that of the soul, and that of the soul depends on spiritual consolations." "Your heart has not weakened – he wrote to a sick woman – rather your body, and, given the very close ties that unite them, your heart has the impression of experiencing

the pain of your body." Everyone can see that bodily infirmities "end up creating discomfort even to the spirit, due to the close bonds between the one and the other." Conversely, the spirit acts on the body to the point that "the body perceives the affections that stir in the heart," as occurred with Jesus, who sat by Jacob's well, tired from His heavy commitment to the service of the Kingdom of God.

However, since "the body and spirit often proceed in opposite directions, and as one weakens, the other strengthens," and since "the spirit must reign," "we must support and strengthen it so that it always remains its strongest." So, if I take care of the body, it is "so that it may serve the spirit."

In the meantime, we should be fair towards the body. In case of malaise or mistakes, it often happens that the soul accuses the body and mistreats it, as Balaam did with his donkey: "O poor soul! If your flesh could speak, it would say to you, as Balaam's donkey: why do you beat me, miserable one? It is against you, my soul, that God arms His vengeance; you are the criminal." When a person reforms their inner self, the conversion will also manifest externally: in all attitudes, in the mouth, in the hands, and "even in the hair." The practice of virtue makes a person beautiful internally and also externally. Conversely, an external change, a behaviour of the body can favour an inner change. An act of external devotion during meditation can awaken inner devotion. What is said here about spiritual life can easily be applied to education in general.

Love and dominance of the body

Speaking of the attitude one should have towards the body and physical realities, it is not surprising to see Francis de Sales that recommends Philothea, first of all, gratitude for the physical graces that God has given her.

We must love our body for several reasons: because it is necessary for us to perform good works, because it is a part

of our person, and because it is destined to participate in eternal happiness. Christians must love their bodies as a living image of that of the incarnate Saviour, as coming from Him by kinship and consanguinity. Especially after we have renewed the covenant, truly receiving the body of the Redeemer in the adorable Sacrament of the Eucharist, and, with Baptism, Confirmation, and the other sacraments, we have dedicated and consecrated ourselves to supreme goodness.

Loving one's own body is part of the love owed to oneself. In truth, the most convincing reason to honour and wisely use the body lies in a vision of faith, which the bishop of Geneva explained to the mother of Chantal after she recovered from an illness: "Take care of this body, for it is of God, my dearest Mother." The Virgin Mary is presented at this point as a model: "With what devotion she must have loved her virginal body! Not only because it was a sweet, humble, pure body, obedient to holy love and totally imbued with a thousand sacred perfumes, but also because it was the living source of that of the Saviour and belonged to Him very closely, with a bond that has no comparison."

The love of the body is indeed recommended, but the body must remain subject to the spirit, as the servant to his master. To control appetite, I must "command my hands not to provide the mouth with food and drink, except in the right measure." To govern sexuality, "one must remove or give to the reproductive faculty the subjects, objects, and foods that excite it, according to the dictates of reason." To the young man who is about to "set sail in the vast sea," the bishop recommends: "I also wish you a vigorous heart that prevents you from pampering your body with excessive delicacies in eating, sleeping, or other things. It is known, in fact, that a generous heart always feels a bit of contempt for bodily delicacies and delights."

In order for the body to remain subject to the law of the spirit, it is advisable to avoid excesses: neither mistreat it nor pamper it. In everything, moderation is

necessary. The spirit of charity must prevail over all things. This leads him to write: “If the work you do is necessary for you or is very useful for the glory of God, I would prefer that you endure the pains of work rather than those of fasting.” Hence the conclusion: “In general, it is better to have more strength in the body than is needed, rather than ruin it beyond what is necessary; because it is always possible to ruin it whenever one wants, but to recover it is not always enough to just want it.”

What must be avoided is this “tenderness one feels for oneself.” With fine irony but in a ruthless manner, he takes it out on an imperfection that is not only “characteristic of children, and, if I may dare to say, of women,” but also of cowardly men, of whom he gives this interesting characteristic representation: “There are others who are compassionate towards themselves, and who do nothing but complain, coddle, pamper and look at themselves.”

In any case, the bishop of Geneva took care of his body, as was his duty, and obeyed his doctor and the “nurses.” He also took care of the health of others, giving advice on appropriate measures. He would write, for example, to the mother of a young student at the college of Annecy: “It is necessary to have Charles examined by doctors, so that his abdominal swelling does not worsen.”

Hygiene is at the service of health. Francis de Sales desired that both the heart and the body be clean. He recommended decorum, very different from statements like that of Saint Hilary, according to which “one should not seek cleanliness in our bodies, which are nothing but pestilential carcasses and only full of infection.” He was rather of the opinion of Saint Augustine and the ancient people who bathed “to keep their bodies clean from the dirt produced by heat and sweat, and also for health, which is certainly greatly aided by cleanliness.”

In order to work and fulfil the duties of one’s office, everyone should take care of their body regarding nutrition and rest: “To eat little, work a lot and with much

agitation, and deny the body the necessary rest, is like demanding much from a horse that is exhausted without giving it time to chew a bit of fodder." The body needs to rest. This is quite evident. Long evening vigils are "harmful to the head and stomach," while, on the other hand, getting up early in the morning is "useful for both health and holiness."

Educating our senses, especially the eyes and ears

Our senses are wonderful gifts from the Creator. They connect us to the world and open us to all sensitive realities, to nature, to the cosmos. The senses are the door to the spirit, which they provide, so to speak, with the raw material; indeed, as the scholastic tradition says, "nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses."

When Francis de Sales speaks of the senses, his interest leads him particularly to the educational and moral levels, and his teaching on this matter is connected to what he has presented about the body in general: admiration and vigilance. On the one hand, he says that God gives us "eyes to see the wonders of His works, a tongue to praise Him, and so for all the other faculties," without ever omitting, and on the other, the recommendation to "set up sentinels for the eyes, the mouth, the ears, the hands, and the sense of smell."

It is necessary to start with sight, because "among all the external parts of the human body, there is none, in terms of structure and activity, more noble than the eye." The eye is made for light. This is demonstrated by the fact that the more beautiful, pleasant to the sight, and properly illuminated things are, the more the eye gazes at them with eagerness and liveliness. "From the eyes and words, one knows what the soul and spirit of a man are, for the eyes serve the soul as the dial serves the clock." It is well known that among lovers, the eyes speak more than the tongue.

We must be vigilant over the eyes, for through them temptation and sin can enter, as happened to Eve, who was enchanted by the beauty of the forbidden fruit, or to David, who fixed his gaze on Uriah's wife. In certain cases, one must

proceed as one does with a bird of prey: to make it return, it is necessary to show it the lure; to calm it, one must cover it with a hood; similarly, to avoid bad looks, “one must turn the eyes away, cover them with the natural hood, and close them.”

Granted that visual images are largely dominant in the works of Francis de Sales, it must be recognised that auditory images are also quite noteworthy. This highlights the importance he attributed to hearing for both aesthetic and moral reasons. “A sublime melody listened to with great concentration” produces such a magical effect as to “enchant the ears.” But be careful not to exceed auditory capacities: music, however beautiful, if loud and too close, bothers us and offends the ear.

Besides, it must be known that “the heart and the ears converse with each other,” for it is through the ear that the heart “listens to the thoughts of others.” It is also through the ear that suspicious, insulting, lying, or malevolent words enter into the depths of the soul, from which one must be very careful. For souls are poisoned through the ear, just as the body is through the mouth. The honest woman will cover her ears so as not to hear the voice of the enchanter who wants to cunningly seduce her. Remaining in the symbolic realm, Francis de Sales declares that the right ear is the organ through which we hear spiritual messages, good inspirations, and motions, while the left serves to hear worldly and vain discourses. To guard the heart, we must therefore protect the ears with great care.

The best service we can ask of the ears is to hear the word of God, the object of preaching, which requires attentive listeners eager to let it penetrate their hearts so that it may bear fruit. Philothea is invited to “let it drip” into the ear, first of one and then of the other, and to pray to God in the depths of her soul, that He may enjoy letting that holy dew penetrate the hearts of those who listen.

The other senses

Also, as regards the sense of smell, the abundance of olfactory images has been noted. The perfumes are as diverse as the fragrant substances, such as milk, wine, balm, oil, myrrh, incense, aromatic wood, spikenard, ointment, rose, onion, lily, violet, pansy, mandrake, cinnamon… It is even more astonishing to observe the results produced by the making of scented water:

Basil, rosemary, marjoram, hyssop, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, lemons, and musk, mixed together and crushed, do indeed give off a very pleasant fragrance from the mixture of their odours. However, it is not even comparable to that of the water distilled from them, in which the aromas of all these ingredients, isolated from their cores, blend more perfectly, giving rise to an exquisite fragrance that penetrates the sense of smell much more than would happen if the material parts were present along with the water.

There are numerous olfactory images drawn from the Song of Solomon, an oriental poem where perfumes occupy a prominent place and where one of the biblical verses most commented on by Francis de Sales is the heartfelt cry of the bride: “Draw me to you, we will walk and run together in the wake of your perfumes.” And how refined is this note: “The sweet fragrance of the rose is made more subtle by the proximity of the garlic planted near the rose bushes!”.

However, let us not confuse the sacred balm with the perfumes of this world. There is indeed a spiritual sense of smell, which we should cultivate in our interest. It allows us to perceive the spiritual presence of the beloved subject, and also ensures that we do not let ourselves be distracted by the bad odours of others. The model is the father who welcomes the prodigal son returning to him “semi-nude, dirty, filthy, and stinking of filth from long association with pigs.” Another realistic image appears in reference to certain worldly criticisms. Let us not be surprised, Francis de Sales advises Giovanna di Chantal, it is necessary “that the little

ointment we have seems stinking to the nostrils of the world."

Regarding taste, certain observations by the bishop of Geneva might lead us to think that he was a born gourmand, indeed an educator of taste: "Who does not know that the sweetness of honey increasingly unites our sense of taste with a continuous progression of flavour, when, keeping it in the mouth for a long time instead of swallowing it immediately, its flavour penetrates more deeply into our sense of taste?" Granted the sweetness of honey, however, it is necessary to appreciate salt more, for the fact that it is more commonly used. In the name of sobriety and temperance, Francis de Sales recommended knowing how to renounce personal taste, eating what is "put before us."

Finally, regarding touch, Francis de Sales speaks of it especially in a spiritual and mystical sense. Thus, he recommends touching Our Lord crucified: the head, the holy hands, the precious body, the heart. To the young man about to set sail into the vast sea of the world, he requires that he govern himself vigorously and to despise softness, bodily delights, and daintiness: "I would like you to sometimes treat your body harshly to make it experience some harshness and toughness, despising delicacies and things pleasant to the senses; for it is necessary that sometimes reason exercises its superiority and the authority it has to regulate sensual appetites."

The body and spiritual life

The body is also called to participate in the spiritual life that is expressed primarily in prayer: "It is true, the essence of prayer is in the soul, but the voice, gestures, and other external signs, through which the innermost part of hearts is revealed, are noble appurtenances and very useful properties of prayer. They are effects and operations. The soul is not satisfied with praying if man does not pray in his entirety; it prays together with the eyes, the hands, the knees."

He adds that "the soul prostrated before God

easily makes the entire body bend over itself; it raises the eyes where it elevates the heart, lifts the hands there, from where it awaits help." Francis de Sales also explains that "to pray in spirit and truth is to pray willingly and affectionately, without pretence or hypocrisy, and engaging the whole person, soul and body, so that what God has joined is not separated." "The whole person must pray," he repeats to the visiting sisters. But the best prayer is that of Philothea, when she decides to consecrate to God not only her soul, spirit, and heart, but also her "body with all its senses". This is how she will truly love and serve Him with all her being.

Education according to st. Francis de Sales

Education according to St. Francis de Sales is a path of love and care toward the young, based on essential principles: gentleness, understanding, and balanced correction. From the family to society, St. Francis urges those responsible to show sincere affection, knowing that young people need to be guided with patience and inspiration. Education is a gift that helps shape free souls, capable of thinking and acting in harmony. Like a mountain guide, the Savoyard bishop reminds us that to correct is to accompany—safeguarding the spontaneity of growing hearts while always aiming for inner transformation. In this way, an integral education is born.

A duty to be performed with love

Education is a universal phenomenon, based on the laws of nature and reason. It is the best gift that parents can give their children, one that will foster gratitude and

filial piety. Speaking of those responsible for others—whether in the family or in society—Francis de Sales recommends that they show affection: “Therefore, let them do their duty with love.”

Young people need guidance. If it is true that “he who rules himself is ruled by a great fool,” this is even more so for those who have not yet gained experience. Similarly, Celse-Bénigne, the eldest son of Madame de Chantal—who was a source of concern for his mother—needed guidance to help him “taste the goodness of true wisdom through admonitions and recommendations.”

To a young man about to “set sail into the world,” he suggested finding “some courteous spirit” who could visit him from time to time to “refresh and regain spiritual breath.” We should do as the young Tobias in the Bible did: sent by his father to a distant land where he did not know the way, he received the advice, “Go, therefore, and find a man to guide you.”

A mountain expert, the Savoyard bishop loved to remind us that those who walk on rugged and slippery paths need to be bound together—tethered to one another in order to advance more securely. Whenever he could, he offered help and advice to young people in danger. To a schoolboy engrossed in gambling and debauchery, he wrote “a letter full of good, gentle, and friendly warnings,” urging him to make better use of his time.

A good guide must be able to adapt to the needs and abilities of each individual. Francis de Sales admired mothers who knew how to give each of their children what they needed and to adjust to each “according to the capacity of his spirit.” This is how God accompanies people. His teaching is like that of a father attentive to each one’s abilities: “Like a good father who holds his child’s hand,” he wrote to Jeanne de Chantal, “he will adjust his steps to yours and will be content not to go faster than you.”

Elements of youth psychology

For an educator to have any chance of success, they must know something about young people in general and about each young person in particular. What does it mean to be young? Commenting on the famous vision of Jacob's ladder, the author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* observes that the angels ascending and descending the ladder possessed all the charms of youth: they were full of vigour and agility; they had wings to fly and feet to walk alongside their companions; their faces were beautiful and cheerful; "their legs, their arms, and their heads were all bare," while "the rest of their bodies were covered, but with a beautiful and light garment."

But let us not idealize this stage of life too much. For Francis de Sales, youth is by nature reckless and bold; young people tend to tackle difficulties from afar while fleeing those that are close at hand. "Young and ardent" are two adjectives that often go hand in hand, especially when used to describe a mind "teeming with ideas and strongly inclined toward extremes." And among the risks of this age is "the ardour of youthful blood that begins to boil and a courage not yet guided by prudence."

Young people are versatile—they move and change easily. Like young dogs that love change, they are fickle and inconsistent, stirred by various "desires for novelty and change," and are liable to provoke "great and unfortunate scandals." It is an age in which passions are fierce and difficult to control. Like butterflies, they flutter around the fire at the risk of burning their wings.

They often lack wisdom and experience, for self-love blinds reason. We must be wary of two opposing attitudes in them: vanity, which is actually a lack of courage, and ambition, which is an excess of courage that leads them to seek glory and honour in an unreasonable way.

What a wonder, however, when youth and virtue meet! Francis de Sales admired a young woman who, though she had every reason to indulge in the pleasures of the springtime of her life, loved and esteemed "the holy virtues." He praised all those who, during their youth, kept their soul "always

pure amidst so many infections."

Above all, young people are sensitive to the affection they receive. "It is impossible to express how much we are friends," he wrote to a father regarding his relationship with his undisciplined—even unbearable—son at school. As can be seen, Francis de Sales was happy to proclaim himself a friend of the young. He likewise wrote to the mother of a little girl for whom he was godfather: "The dear little goddaughter, I believe, carries within her a secret indication of my affection for her, so strong is the love she shows me."

Finally, "this is the right age to receive impressions," which is an excellent thing because it means that young people can be educated and are capable of great things. The future belongs to the young, as we have seen at the Montmartre abbey, where it was precisely the young—with their even younger abbess—who carried out the "reform."

The sense of purpose in education

On the one hand, realism imposes on educators the need to truly know the people to whom they address their efforts; on the other hand, they must never lose sight of the purpose of their actions. There is nothing better than a clear awareness of the goals we set for ourselves, for "every agent acts for the sake and according to the end."

What, then, is education and what is its purpose? Education, says Francis de Sales, is "a multitude of solicitations, aids, services, and other necessary provisions for the child, carried out and continued toward him until the age when he no longer needs them." Two aspects stand out in this definition: on one hand, the emphasis on the multitude of attentions that education requires, and on the other, its end, which coincides with the moment when the individual has reached autonomy. Children are educated to achieve freedom and full control over their own lives.

In concrete terms, Francis de Sales' educational ideal seems to revolve around the notion of harmony—that is, the harmonious integration of all the various components that

exist in the human being: “actions, movements, feelings, inclinations, habits, passions, faculties, and powers.” Harmony implies unity, but also distinction. Unity requires a single commandment, yet that very commandment must not only respect differences but also promote distinctions in the pursuit of harmony. In the human person, governance belongs to the will, to which all the other components refer—each in its proper place and in interdependence with one another.

Francis de Sales employs two analogies to illustrate his ideal. They are reminiscent of the two fundamental human drives highlighted by psychoanalysis: aggression and pleasure. An army, he explains, is beautiful when it is composed of distinct parts arranged in such a way as to form one cohesive force. Similarly, music is beautiful when the voices are united in their distinction even as they join together.

Starting from the heart

“Whoever has conquered the heart of man has conquered all of man,” writes the author of *Introduction to the Devout Life*. This general rule should apply in the field of education. The expression “to conquer the heart” can be interpreted in two ways. It can mean that the educator must aim for the heart—that is, the inner centre of the person—before concerning themselves with outward behaviour. Alternatively, it means winning a person over through affection.

Man is built from the inside out; this appears to be one of the great lessons of Francis de Sales, a trainer and reformer of individuals and communities. He was well aware that his method was not shared by all, for he wrote, “I have never been able to approve of the method of those who, in order to reform man, begin from the outside—from his bearing, his clothes, his hair.” One must therefore start from within, that is, from the heart—the seat of the will and the source of all our actions.

The second point is to win the affection of

others, in order to establish a good educational relationship. In a letter to an abbess advising her on the reform of her monastery—which was largely composed of young people—we find valuable insights into how the Savoyard bishop conceived his method of education, formation, and, in this case more precisely, "reform." Above all, we must not alarm them by giving the impression that we intend to reform them; the goal is for them to reform themselves. After these preliminaries, one must use three or four "tricks." It is not surprising, since education is also an art—in fact, the art of all arts. First, ask them to do things often, but with great ease and without giving the impression of forcing them. Second, speak frequently and in general terms about what needs to be changed, as if thinking of someone else. Third, strive to make obedience pleasant, while once again highlighting its benefits and advantages. According to Francis de Sales, gentleness should be preferred because it is generally more effective. Finally, those in charge must show that they do not act on a whim but in virtue of their responsibility and for the good of all.

To command, to advise, to inspire

It seems that the interventions proposed by Francis de Sales in the educational field are modelled on the three ways in which God communicates His will to men: commands, advice, and inspirations.

It is obvious that parents and teachers have the right and duty to command their children or pupils for their own good, and that they must obey. He himself, in his responsibility as bishop, did not hesitate to do so when necessary. However, according to Camus, he abhorred absolute spirits who demanded unquestioning obedience and to whom everything must yield. He said, "those who love to be feared, fear to be loved." In some cases, obedience may be compelled. Referring to the son of one of his friends, he wrote to the father: "If he persists, we will be satisfied; if he does not, we will have to resort to one of these two remedies: either

withdraw him to a school a bit more restrictive than this one, or provide him with a private tutor—a man to whom he must render obedience." Can the use of force be entirely excluded?

Usually, however, Francis de Sales resorted to advice, warnings, and recommendations. The author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* presents himself as an advisor, an assistant—someone who gives "advice." Even though he often uses the imperative, it is advice he is giving, especially as it is frequently accompanied by a conditional: "If you can do it, do it." Sometimes the recommendation is disguised as a statement of value: it is good to do this, it is better to do that, and so on.

But when he can, and when his authority is not in question, he prefers to act by inspiration, suggestion, or insinuation. This is the quintessential Salesian method, one that respects human freedom. It seemed particularly suitable to him when choosing a way of life. This is the method he advised Madame de Chantal to use for the vocation she desired for her children, "inspiring in them with gentle thoughts in harmony with it."

Yet inspiration is not communicated solely through words. The heavens do not speak, as the Bible says, but proclaim the glory of God with their silent testimony. In the same way, "a good example is a silent preaching"—as exemplified by St. Francis, who, without uttering a single word, attracted a great number of young people with his example. Indeed, example leads to imitation. "The little nightingales learn to sing with the great," he recalled, and "the example of those we love has a gentle and imperceptible influence and authority over us," to the point that we are compelled either to follow them or to imitate them.

How to correct?

The spirit of correction consists in "resisting evil and repressing the vices of those entrusted to us, constantly and valiantly, but with gentleness and calm." However, faults must be corrected without delay – while they

are still small – “because if you wait for them to grow, you will not be able to remedy them easily.”

Severity is sometimes necessary. The two young religious who were causing scandal had to be set back on the right path if one wished to avoid a multitude of deplorable consequences. Although their youth might have been used as an excuse, “the continuation of their behaviour now renders them unforgivable.” There are even cases in which it is necessary “to keep the wicked in some fear of the resistance they will offer.” The Bishop of Geneva quotes a letter from St. Bernard to the monks of Rome who needed correction, in which he “speaks to them as one ought, and with a rebuke that is rather severe.” Let us act like the surgeon, for “it is a weak or poor friendship to see one’s friend perish and not help him, to see him die of apostasy and not dare to offer him the razor’s edge of correction to save him.”

Yet correction must be administered without passion, because “a judge punishes the wicked much more effectively when he issues his sentences with reason and in a spirit of calm, rather than when he does so with impetuosity and passion—especially since, judging with passion, he does not punish faults according to what they are but according to what he himself is.” In the same way, “a father’s gentle and cordial admonitions have far more power to correct a child than his anger and wrath.” This is why it is important to guard against anger. The first time you feel anger, he told Filotea, “you must quickly gather your strength—not suddenly or with impetuosity, but with gentleness and seriousness.” In a letter to a nun who had complained about “a surly and disruptive little girl” entrusted to her care, the bishop advised: “Do not correct her, if you can, with anger.” Let us not act like King Herod or like those men who claim to rule because they are feared, when in truth to rule means “to be loved.”

There are many ways to correct. One of the best methods is not so much to reprimand what is negative, but to encourage all that is positive in a person. This is called

“correcting by inspiration,” because “it is wonderful how the gentleness and kindness of something good is a powerful way to attract hearts.”

His disciple, Jean-Pierre Camus, recounted the story of a mother who cursed the son who had insulted her. It was thought that the bishop should do the same, but he replied, “What do you want me to do? I feared that in a quarter of an hour I would pour out the little liquor of kindness that I had laboured to collect over twenty-two years.” Camus also relates this “unforgettable” saying of his master: “Remember that you catch more flies with a drop of honey than with a barrel of vinegar.”

Kindness is preferable not only toward others but also toward ourselves. Everyone should be ready to recognize their own mistakes calmly and to correct themselves without becoming angry. Here is a good piece of advice for a “poor girl” who is angry with herself: “Tell her that, no matter how much she complains, she will never be surprised or angry with herself.”

Progressive education

St. Francis de Sales, who possessed a keen sense of reality and possibility—as well as the necessary moderation and tact—was convinced that great projects are achieved only with patience and time. Perfection is never the starting point and will probably never be reached, but it is always possible to make progress. Growth has its own laws that must be respected: bees were first larvae, then nymphs, and finally “formed, made, and perfect” bees.

Doing things in an orderly fashion—one after the other, without clamour, even if with some slowness, but never stopping—seems to be the ideal of the Bishop of Geneva. “Let us move forward,” he would say, “and no matter how slowly we advance, we will cover great distances.” Similarly, he advised an abbess tasked with the arduous job of reforming her monastery: “You must have a great and enduring heart.” The law of progression is universal and applies in every field.

To illustrate his thought, the saint of gentleness employed countless analogies and images to instil a sense of time and the necessity of perseverance. Some people are prone to fly before they have wings, or to want to become angels all at once, when they are not yet merely good men and women. When children are small, we give them milk; and when they grow and begin to have teeth, we give them bread and butter.

An important point is not to be afraid of repeating the same thing over and over. One must emulate painters and sculptors who create their masterpieces by repeating brush strokes and chisel blows. Education is a long journey. Along the way, one must purge oneself of many negative "humours," and this purification is slow. But we must not lose heart. Slowness does not mean resignation or a casual waiting. On the contrary, we must learn to make the best use of everything, not wasting time and knowing how to use "our years, our months, our weeks, our days, our hours, even our moments."

Patience, often taught by the Bishop of Geneva, is an active patience that allows us to move forward—even if in small steps. "Little by little and step by step, we must acquire this mastery," he wrote to an impatient Filotea. "First we learn to walk in small steps, then to hurry, then to walk halfway, and finally to run." The growth toward adulthood begins slowly and then accelerates, just as formation and education do. Finally, patience is nourished by hope: "There is no land so unfruitful that the love of the labourer cannot fertilize it."

Integral education

From all that has been said so far, it is quite clear that for Francis de Sales education could not be confined to just one dimension of the person—such as mere instruction, good manners, or even a religious education devoid of human foundations. Naturally, one cannot deny the importance of each of these specific areas. With regard to the education and formation of the mind, one need only recall the

time and effort he himself devoted during his youth to acquiring a high intellectual and “professional” culture, as well as the care he took in nurturing education in his diocese.

However, his primary concern was the integral formation of the human person, understood in all its dimensions and dynamics. To demonstrate this, we must focus on each of the constitutive dimensions of the human being in its full symbolic entirety: the body with all its senses, the soul with all its passions, the mind with all its faculties, and the heart—the seat of the will, of love, and of freedom.

Saint Francis de Sales, founder of a new school of perfection

For Francis de Sales, religious life is “a school of perfection”, in which one “consecrates oneself more simply and more totally to Our Lord”. “Religious life”, adds the founder of the Visitation, “is a school where everyone must learn the lesson: the teacher does not require that the student knows the lesson perfectly every day; it is enough that they strive to do what they can to learn it”. Speaking of the congregation of the Visitation he founded, he used the same language: “The congregation is a school”; one enters it “to embark on the path toward the perfection of divine love”.

It was the founder’s responsibility to form his spiritual daughters, taking on the role of “instructor” and Novice Master. He performed this role excellently. According to T. Mandrini, “Saint Francis de Sales occupies a primary place in the history of religious life, like Saint Ignatius of

Loyola; we can even say that, in the history of women's religious life, Saint Francis de Sales occupies the place that Saint Ignatius holds in the history of men's religious life".

Joan of Chantal at the origins of the Visitation

In 1604, in Dijon, where he was preaching during Lent, Francis de Sales met the woman who was to become the "cornerstone" of a new institute. At that time, Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot was a thirty-two-year-old young widow. Born in 1572 in Dijon, she was married at twenty to Christophe Rabutin, Baron of Chantal. They had one son and three daughters. Fifteen days after the birth of their last daughter, her husband was mortally wounded during a hunting party. Left as a widow, Joan courageously continued to care for her children's education and to help the poor.

The meeting of Chantal with the Bishop of Geneva marked the beginning of a true spiritual friendship that would lead to a new form of religious life. At first, Francis de Sales instilled in Joan the love of the humility required by her state as a widow, without thinking of a new marriage or religious life; the will of God would manifest itself in due time. He encouraged her in trials and temptations against faith and the Church.

In 1605, the baroness came to Sales to see her director again and to discuss the issues that concerned her. Francis evasively responded to Joan's desire to become a nun but added these strong words, "The day you abandon everything, you will come to me, and I will ensure that you find yourself in total detachment and nakedness, to belong entirely to God". To prepare her for this ultimate goal, he suggested: "sweetness of heart, poverty of spirit, and simplicity of life, along with these three modest exercises: visiting the sick, serving the poor, comforting the afflicted, and others like them".

At the beginning of 1606, as the baroness' father urged her to remarry, the issue of religious life became urgent. What to do, wondered the Bishop of Geneva? One thing

was clear, but the other was uncertain:

I have learned up to this moment, my Daughter, that one day you will have to leave everything; or rather, so that you do not understand the matter differently than I have understood it, that one day I will have to advise you to leave everything. I say leave everything. But that you should do it to enter religious life is unlikely, because it has not yet happened to me to be of this opinion: I am still in doubt, and I see nothing before me that invites me to desire it. Understand me well, for the love of God. I am not saying 'no', but I am only saying that my spirit has not yet found a reason to say 'yes'.

The prudence and unhurriedness of Francis de Sales is easily explained. The baroness, in fact, perhaps dreamed of becoming a Carmelite, and he, on the other hand, had not yet matured the project of the new foundation. But the main obstacle was constituted by the children of Madame de Chantal, who were all still young.

The foundation

During a new meeting that took place in Annecy in 1607, Francis declared to her this time: "Well! My daughter, I have decided what I want to do with you"; and he revealed to her the project of founding a new institute with her. There remained two major obstacles towards its realization: the family duties of Madame de Chantal and her permanent move to Annecy, because, he said, "it is necessary to sow the seed of our congregation in little Annecy". And while Madame de Chantal was probably dreaming of a completely contemplative life, Francis cited the example of Saint Martha, but Martha "corrected" by the example of Mary, who divided the hours of her days in two, "dedicating a good part to external works of charity, and the better part to her own inner self through contemplation".

During the following three years, the main obstacles fell one after another: Chantal's father allowed her

to follow her own path, also agreeing to care for the education of the firstborn; the eldest daughter married Bernard de Sales, Francis's brother, and joined him in Savoy; the second daughter would accompany her mother to Annecy; as for the youngest, she died at the end of January 1610 at the age of nine.

On June 6th, 1610, Joan of Chantal settled in a private house with Charlotte, a friend from Burgundy, and Jacqueline, daughter of President Antoine Favre. Their purpose was to "consecrate all the moments of their life to loving and serving God", without neglecting "the service of the poor and the sick". The Visitation would be a "small congregation", uniting interior life with a form of active life. The first three *Visitandines* (Visitation Sisters) made their profession exactly one year later, on June 6th, 1611. On January 1st, 1612, they would begin visits to the poor and the sick, as provided in the original draft of the Constitutions. On October 30th of the same year, the community left the house, which had become too small, and moved to a new house, awaiting the construction of the first monastery of the Visitation.

During the early years, no other foundation was dreamed of, until in 1615 a persistent request came from some people in Lyon. The archbishop of that city did not want the Sisters to leave the monastery for visits to the sick; according to him, the congregation needed to be transformed into a true religious order, with solemn vows and enclosure, following the prescriptions of the Council of Trent. Francis de Sales had to accept most of the conditions: the visit to the sick was suppressed, and the Visitation became an almost monastic order, under the rule of Saint Augustine, while still retaining the possibility of welcoming outsiders for a bit of rest or for spiritual exercises. Its development was rapid: it would count thirteen monasteries at the founder's death in 1622 and eighty-seven at the death of Mother Chantal in 1641.

Formation through gatherings

George Rolland has well described the role of the formation of the "daughters" of the Visitation, which Francis de Sales took on from the very beginning of the new institute:

He assisted them in their beginnings, working hard and dedicating much time to educate them and guide them on the path of perfection, first all of them together and then each one in person. Therefore, he would go to them, often two or three times a day, giving them guidance on issues that came to their minds, both of a spiritual and material nature. […] He was their confessor, chaplain, spiritual father, and director.

The tone of his "gatherings" was very simple and familiar. A gathering, in fact, is a friendly conversation, a dialogue or family discussion, not a "sermon", but rather a "simple conference in which each one expresses their opinion". Normally, the questions were posed by the Sisters, as is clearly seen in the third of his *Gatherings* where he speaks of *Confidence and Abandonmen*t. The first question was to know "if a soul aware of its misery can turn to God with full confidence". A little further on, the founder seems to seize the opportunity offered by a new question: "But you say that you do not feel this confidence at all". A little further, he states: "Now let us move on to the other question, which is to abandon oneself". And even further on, there is a chain of questions like these: "Now you ask me what this soul that completely abandons itself into the hands of God occupies itself with"; "you tell me at this hour"; "now you ask me"; "to respond to what you are asking"; "you want to know more". It is possible, indeed probable, that the secretaries suppressed the questions of the interlocutors to place them on the bishop's lips. The questions could also have been formulated in writing, because at the beginning of the eleventh *Gathering* we read, "Let me begin our conversation by responding to a question that was written to me on this note".

Instructions and exhortations

The other method used in the formation of the

Visitation Sisters excluded questions and answers: they were *sermons* that the founder gave in the chapel of the monastery. The familiar tone that characterizes them does not allow them to be classified among the great sermons for the people according to the style of the time. R. Balboni prefers to call them *exhortations*. “The speech I am about to give you”, the founder would say as he began to speak. He would sometimes refer to his “little talk”, a qualification that certainly did not apply to its duration, which was usually about an hour. Once he said, “Having some time, I will treat of…”. The bishop addressed a particular audience, the Visitation Sisters, to which relatives and friends could be added. When he spoke in the chapel, the founder had to take this audience into account, which could be different from that of the *Gatherings* reserved for the religious. The diversity of his interventions is well described by the comparison between the barber and the surgeon:

My dear daughters, when I speak before the laity, I act like a barber; I am content to shave off the superfluous, that is, I use soap to soften a little the skin of the heart, as the barber does to soften that of the chin before shaving it; but when I am in the parlour, I behave like an expert surgeon, that is, I bandage the wounds of my dear daughters, even though they cry out a little: Ouch!, and I do not stop pressing my hand on the wound to ensure that the bandaging helps to heal it well.

But even in the chapel, the tone continued to be familiar, similar to a conversation. “We need to go further”, he would say, “because I lack the time to dwell longer on this topic”; or again, “Before finishing, let us say one more word”. And another time, “But I will go beyond this first point without adding anything more, because it is not on this theme that I intend to dwell”. When he speaks of the mystery of the Visitation, he needs extra time, “I will conclude with two examples, although time has already passed; in any case, a

brief quarter of an hour will suffice". Sometimes he expresses his feelings, saying that he has felt "pleasure" in discussing mutual love. Nor did he fear to make some digression, "In this regard", he would say another time, "I will tell you two little stories that I would not narrate if I had to speak from another pulpit; but here there is no danger". To keep the audience attentive, he would engage them with a "tell me", or with the expression, "Notice then, I beg you". He often connected back to a topic he had previously developed, saying, "I wish to add one more word to the speech I gave you the other day". "But I see that the hour is passing quickly", he exclaims, "which will make me finish by completing, in the little time that remains, the story of this gospel". And, when the moment to conclude arrives, he says, "I have finished".

It is important to keep in mind that the preacher was welcomed, listened to attentively, and sometimes even authorized to tell the same story again, "Although I have already narrated it, I will not fail to repeat it, since I am not before people so appalled that they are unwilling to listen to the same story twice; those who have a good appetite gladly eat the same food twice".

The *Sermons* present themselves as a more structured instruction compared to the *Gatherings*, where the topics sometimes follow one another rapidly, driven by questions. Here, the connection is more logical, and the different articulations of the discourse are better indicated. The preacher explains Scripture, comments on it through the Fathers and theologians, but it is a rather meditative explanation capable of nourishing the mental prayer of the religious. Like every meditation, it includes considerations, affections, and resolutions. Indeed, all his speech revolved around an essential question, "Do you want to become a good daughter of the Visitation?"

Personal accompaniment

Lastly, there was personal contact with each Sister. Francis had a long experience as a confessor and

spiritual director of individuals. It was necessary to take into account, it is quite evident, the “variety of spirits”, temperaments, particular situations, and progress in perfection. In the memoirs of Marie-Adrienne Fichet, there is an episode that shows the way of doing of the Bishop of Geneva, “Monsignor, your Excellency, would you be so kind as to assign to each of us a virtue to individually commit to practicing?” Perhaps it was a pious stratagem invented by the superior. The founder replied, “Mother, gladly, we must start with you”. The Sisters withdrew, and the bishop called them one by one and, while strolling, secretly threw a “challenge” to each. During the subsequent recreation, all evidently became aware of the challenge he had confided to each in particular. To Mother Chantal, he had recommended “indifference and loving the will of God”; to Jacqueline Favre, “the presence of God”; to Charlotte de Bréchard, “resignation to the will of God”. The challenges directed at the other religious concerned, one after another, modesty and tranquillity, love for one’s condition, mortification of the senses, affability, inner humility, outer humility, detachment from parents and the world, and mortification of passions. To the Visitation Sisters tempted to consider perfection as a garment to be put on, he humorously reminded them of their personal responsibility:

You would like me to teach you a way of perfection that is already beautifully ready-made, so that there would be nothing to do but put it on, as you would with a dress, and thus you would find yourselves perfect without effort, that is, you would like me to present you with a perfection that is already packaged […]. Certainly, if this were in my power, I would be the most perfect man in the world; indeed, if I could give perfection to others without doing anything, I assure you that I would take it for myself first.

How to reconcile in a community the necessary unity, or rather uniformity, with the diversity of the people

and temperaments that compose it? The founder wrote in this regard to the superior of the Visitation of Lyon, “If one finds some soul or even some novice who feels too much repugnance to submit to those exercises that are indicated, and if this repugnance does not arise from a whim, from presumption, from arrogance, or melancholic tendencies, it will be up to the Novice Mistress to lead them by another way, although this is useful for the ordinary (formation journey), as experience shows”. As always, obedience and freedom should not be opposed to one another. Strength and sweetness must also characterise the way in which the superiors of the Visitation should “mould” the souls. Indeed, he tells them, it is “with your hands” that God “moulds souls, using either the hammer, or the chisel, or the brush, in order to shape them all to His liking”. The superiors must have “hearts of solid, steadfast, and constant fathers, without neglecting the tenderness of mothers who make sweets desirable to children, following the divine order that governs everything with a very gentle strength and a very strong gentleness”. The Novice Mistresses deserved to have particular attention from the founder because “on the good formation and direction of the novices depend the life and good health of the congregation”. “How to form future Visitation Sisters when one is far from the founders?”, the Novice Mistress in Lyon asked. Francis replied, “Say what you have seen, teach what you have heard in Annecy. Here! This little plant is very small and has deep roots; but the branch that separates from it will undoubtedly perish, dry up, and be good for nothing but to be cut and thrown into the fire”.

A manual of perfection

In 1616, Saint Francis de Sales published the *Treatise on the Love of God*, a book “made to help the already devout soul to progress in its project”. As is easy to see, *Teotimo* proposes a sublime doctrine on the love of God, which has earned its author the title of “doctor of charity”, but it does so with a marked pedagogical sense. The author wants to

accompany along the path of the highest love a person called *Teotimo*, a symbolic name that designates “the human spirit that desires to progress in holy love”, that is, in the love of God. *Teotimo* reveals itself as the “manual” of the “school of perfection” that Francis de Sales intended to create. Implicitly, it reveals the idea of the necessity of ongoing formation, illustrated by him through this image drawn from the plant world, “Do we not see, from experience, that plants and fruits do not have a proper growth and maturation unless they bear their grains and seeds that serve for the reproduction of plants and trees of the same species? Virtues never have the right dimension and sufficiency unless they produce in us the desire to make progress. In short, we must imitate this curious animal that is the crocodile, ‘Very small at birth, it never ceases to grow as long as it is alive’.” In the face of the decline and sometimes scandalous conduct of numerous monasteries and abbeys, Francis de Sales traced a demanding but amiable path. In reference to the reformed orders, where a severity and austerity reigned that drove a good number of people away from religious life, the founder of the Visitation Sisters had the profound insight to concentrate the essence of religious life simply in the pursuit of the perfection of charity. With the necessary adaptations, this “pedagogy which reached its peak”, and was born in contact with the Visitation, would largely transcend the walls of its first monastery and captivate other “apprentices” of perfection.

St Francis de Sales, personal

companion

‘My spirit always accompanies yours,’ wrote Francis de Sales one day to Jeanne de Chantal, at a time when she felt assailed by darkness and temptations. He added: ‘Walk therefore, my dear Daughter, and advance in bad weather and during the night. Be courageous, my dear Daughter; with God’s help, we shall do much.’ Accompaniment, spiritual direction, guidance of souls, direction of conscience, spiritual assistance: these are more or less synonymous terms, as they designate this particular form of education and formation exercised in the spiritual sphere of the individual conscience.

Formation of a future companion

The formation he received as a young man had prepared Francis de Sales to become a spiritual director in turn. As a student of the Jesuits in Paris he most likely had a spiritual father whose name we do not know. In Padua, Antonio Possevino had been his director; with this famous Jesuit Francis would later rejoice at having been one of his ‘spiritual sons’. During his tormented path to the clerical state, his confidant and support was Amé Bouvard, a priest friend of the family, who then prepared him for ordination.

At the beginning of his episcopate, he entrusted the care of his spiritual life to Father Fourier, rector of the Jesuits in Chambéry, ‘a great, erudite and devout religious’, with whom he established ‘a very special friendship’ and who was very close to him ‘with his advice and warnings’. For several years, he went to confession regularly to the cathedral penitentiary, whom he called ‘dear brother and perfect friend’.

His stay in Paris in 1602 profoundly influenced the development of his gifts as a director of souls. Sent by the bishop to negotiate some diocesan affairs at court, he had little diplomatic success, but this prolonged visit to the

French capital allowed him to establish contacts with the spiritual elite who came together around Madam Acarie, an exceptional woman, mystic and hostess at the same time. He became her confessor, observed her ecstasies and listened to her without question. ‘Oh! what a mistake I made,’ he would later say, ’for not having taken sufficient advantage of her most holy company! She did indeed open her soul to me freely; but the extreme respect I had for her meant that I did not dare to inform myself of the slightest thing.’

A, insistent activity ‘that reassures and heartens’

Helping each individual, personally accompanying them, advising them, possibly correcting their mistakes, encouraging them, all this requires time, patience and a constant effort of discernment. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* speaks from experience when he states in the preface:

I grant that the guidance of individual souls is a labour, but it is a labour full of consolation, even as that of harvesters and grape-gatherers, who are never so well pleased as when most heavily laden. It is a labour which refreshes and invigorates the heart by the comfort which it brings to those who bear it.

We know this important area of his formative work especially from his correspondence, but it should be pointed out that spiritual direction is not only done in writing. Personal meetings and individual confessions are part of it, although one must distinguish them properly. In 1603, he met the Duke of Bellegarde, a great figure in the kingdom and a great sinner, who a few years later asked him to guide him on the path to conversion. The Lenten series that he preached in Dijon the following year was a turning point in his ‘career’ as a spiritual director, because he met Jeanne Frémyot, widow of the Baron de Chantal.

From 1605 onwards, the systematic visitation of his vast diocese brought him into contact with an endless

number of people of all circumstances, mainly peasants and mountain people, most of whom were illiterate and left us no correspondence. Preaching Lent at Annecy in 1607, he found a twenty-one year old lady, 'but all gold', named Louise Du Chastel, who had married the bishop's cousin, Henri de Charmoisy. The letters of spiritual direction that Francis sent to Madame de Charmoisy would serve as basic material for the drafting of his future work, the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Preaching in Grenoble in 1616, 1617 and 1618 brought him a considerable number of daughters and spiritual sons who, having heard him speak, would seek closer contact. New women followed him on his last trip to Paris in 1618-1619, where he was part of the Savoy delegation that was negotiating the marriage of the Prince of Piedmont, Victor Amadeus, to Christine of France, sister of Louis XIII. After the princely wedding, Christine chose him as her confessor and 'great chaplain'.

The director is father, brother, friend

When addressing the people he directed, Francis de Sales made abundant, use, according to the custom of the time, of titles taken from family and social life, such as *father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, niece, godfather, godmother, or servant*. The title of father signified authority and at the same time love and confidence. The father 'assists' his son and daughter with advice using wisdom, prudence and charity. As a spiritual father, the director is the one who in certain cases says: I do! Francis de Sales knew how to use such language, but only in very special circumstances, as when he ordered the baroness not to avoid meeting with her husband's murderer:

You asked me how I wanted you to behave in the meeting with the one who killed your lord husband. I answer in order. It is not necessary for you to seek the date and occasion yourself. However, if this arises I want you to welcome it with a

gentle, kind and compassionate heart.

He once wrote to a distressed woman: ‘I command you in the name of God’, but it was to remove her scruples. His authority was always humble, good, even tender; his role with regard to the people he directed, he specified in the preface to the *Introduction*, consisted of a special ‘assistance’, a term that appears twice in this context. The intimacy that was established between him and the Duke of Bellegarde was such that Francis de Sales was able to respond to the duke’s request, hesitatingly using the epithets ‘my son’ or ‘monsignor my son’, knowing full well that the duke was older than him. The pedagogical implication of spiritual direction is underlined by another significant image. After recalling the tiger’s swift race to save her cub, moved by the power of natural love, he goes on to say:

And how much more willingly will a paternal heart care for a soul that it has found full of desire for holy perfection, carrying it on its breast, like a mother her child, without feeling the weight of the dear burden.

With regard to the people he directed, women and men, Francis de Sales also acted like a brother, and it is in this capacity that he often presented himself to the people who had recourse to him. Antoine Favre was constantly called ‘my brother’. At first he addressed the Baroness de Chantal as ‘*madame*’ (lady), but later he switched to ‘sister’, ‘this name, which is the one by which the apostles and the first Christians used to express their mutual love’. A brother does not command, he gives advice and practices fraternal correction.

But what best characterises the Salesian style is the friendly and reciprocal atmosphere that united the director and the directee. As André Ravier said so well, ‘there is no true spiritual direction if there is no friendship, that is, exchange, communication, mutual influence’. It is not surprising that Francis de Sales loved

his referents with a love that he witnessed to them in a thousand ways; it is surprising, instead, that he desired to be equally loved by them. With Jeanne de Chantal, the reciprocity became so intense as to sometimes turn ‘mine’ and ‘yours’ into ‘ours’: ‘It is not possible for me to distinguish *mine* and *yours* in what concerns us is *ours*’.

Obedience to the director, but in an atmosphere of confidence and freedom

Obedience to the spiritual director is a guarantee against excesses, illusions and missteps made more often than not for one’s own sake; it maintains a prudent and wise attitude. The author of the *Introduction* considered it necessary and beneficial, without resorting to it; ‘humble obedience, so much recommended and so much practised by all the ancient devotees’, is part of a tradition. Francis de Sales recommended it to the Baroness de Chantal with regard to her first director, but indicating the way to live it:

I greatly commend the religious respect you feel for your director, and I urge you to preserve it with great care; but I must also say one more word to you. This respect must undoubtedly induce you to persevere in the holy conduct to which you have so happily adapted yourself, but it must by no means impede or stifle the just liberty which the Spirit of God gives to whomever he possesses.

In any case, the director must possess three indispensable qualities: ‘He must be full of charity, knowledge and prudence: if one of these three is lacking, there is danger’ (*I* I 4). This does not seem to be the case with Mme de Chantal’s first director. According to her biographer, Mother de Chaugy, he ‘bound her to his direction’ warning her never to think of changing it; they were ‘inappropriate ties that kept her soul trapped, cooped up and without freedom’. When, after meeting Francis de Sales, she wanted to change her director, she was plunged into a sea of scruples. To reassure her, he showed her another way:

Here is the general rule of our obedience, written in very large letters: YOU MUST DO EVERYTHING OUT OF LOVE, AND NOTHING BY CONSTRAINT; YOU MUST LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE. I leave you the spirit of freedom: not the one that excludes obedience, for then one would have to speak of the freedom of the flesh, but the one that excludes compulsion, scruple and haste.

The Salesian way is founded on the respect and obedience due to the director, without any doubt, but above all on confidence: 'Have the greatest confidence in him, together with sacred reverence, so that reverence does not diminish confidence and confidence does not impede reverence; trust him with the respect of a daughter towards her father, respect him with the confidence of a daughter towards her mother'. Confidence inspires simplicity and freedom, which foster communication between two people, especially when the one being directed is a fearful young novice:

I will tell you, in the first place, that you must not use words of ceremony or apology in my regard, for, by God's will, I feel for you all the affection you could desire, and I would not know how to forbid myself to feel it. I love your spirit deeply, because I think God wills it, and I love it tenderly, because I see you still weak and too young. Write to me, therefore, with all confidence and freedom, and ask all that seems useful for your good. And let this be said once and for all.

How should one write to the Bishop of Geneva? 'Write to me freely, sincerely, simply,' he said to one of the souls he directed. 'On this point, I have nothing more to say, except that you must not put *Monsignor* on the letter either alone or accompanied by other words: it is enough for you to put *Sir*, and you know why. I am a man without ceremony, and I love and honour you with all my heart.' This refrain returns frequently at the beginning of a new epistolary relationship. Affection, when it is sincere and especially when it has the

good fortune to be reciprocated, authorises freedom and utmost frankness. ‘Write to me whenever you feel like it,’ he said to another woman, ‘with full confidence and without ceremony; for this is how one should behave in this sort of friendship.’ He told one of his correspondents: ‘Do not ask me to excuse you for writing well or badly, because you owe me no ceremony other than that of loving me. This means speaking “heart to heart”.’ The love of God as well as the love of our neighbour makes us go on “in a good way, without a lot of fuss” because, as he put it, ‘true love does not need a method’. The key to this is love, for ‘love makes lovers equal’, that is, love works a transformation in the people one loves, making them equal, similar and on the same level.

‘Every flower requires special care’.

While the goal of spiritual direction is the same for everyone, namely the perfection of the Christian life, people are not all the same, and it belongs to the skill of the director to know how to indicate the appropriate path for each person to reach the common goal. A man of his time, aware that social stratifications were a reality, Francis de Sales knew well the difference between the gentleman, the artisan, the valet, the prince, the widow, the girl and the married woman. Each, in fact, should produce fruit ‘according to his qualification and profession’. But the sense of belonging to a particular social group went well, in him, with the consideration of the peculiarities of the individual: one must ‘adapt the practice of devotion to the strengths, activities and duties of each one in particular’. He also believed that ‘the means to achieve perfection are different according to the diversity of vocations’.

The diversity of temperaments is a fact which must be taken into account. One can detect in Francis de Sales a ‘psychological flair’ that predates modern discoveries. The perception of the unique characteristics of each person is very pronounced in him and is the reason why each subject deserves special attention from the spiritual father: ‘In a

garden, each herb and each flower requires special care. Like a father or mother with their children, he adapts to the individuality, temperament, and particular situations of each individual. To this person, impatient with himself, disappointed because he is not progressing as he would like, he recommends self-love; to this other, attracted by the religious life but endowed with a strong individuality, he advises a lifestyle that takes into account these two tendencies; to a third, wavering between exaltation and depression, he suggests peace of heart through the struggle against distressing imaginations. To a woman in despair because of her husband's 'spendthrift and frivolous' character, the director will have to advise 'the right means and moderation' and the means to overcome her impatience. Another, a woman with a head on her neck, with an 'all in one piece' character, full of anxieties and trials, will need 'holy sweetness and tranquillity'. Still another is distressed by the thought of death and often depressed: her director inspires her with courage. There are souls who have a thousand desires for perfection; it is necessary to calm their impatience, the fruit of their self-love. The famous Angélique Arnauld, abbess of Port-Royal, wanted to reform her monastery with rigidity: he needed to recommend flexibility and humility to her.

As for the Duke de Bellegarde, who had meddled in all the political and amorous intrigues of the court, the bishop encouraged him to acquire 'a masculine, courageous, invariable devotion to serve as a mirror to many, exalting the truth of heavenly love, worthy of reparation for past faults'. In 1613 he drew up a *Reminder for making a good confession*, containing eight general 'warnings', a detailed description 'of sins against the ten commandments', an 'examination concerning capital sins', 'sins committed against the precepts of the Church', a 'means of discerning mortal sin from venial sin', and finally 'means of turning the great away from the sin of the flesh'.

Regressive method

The art of direction of conscience very often requires the director to take a step back and leave the initiative to the recipient, or to God, especially when it comes to making choices that require a demanding decision. ‘Do not take my words too literally,’ he wrote to Baroness de Chantal, ’I do not want them to be an imposition on you, but that you retain the freedom to do what you think best. He wrote, for example, to a woman who was very attached to ‘vanities’:

When you left, it came into my mind to tell you that you should renounce musk and perfumes, but I restrained myself, in order to follow my system, which is gentle and seeks to await those movements which, little by little, the exercises of piety tend to arouse in souls who consecrate themselves entirely to divine Goodness. My spirit, in fact, is extremely friendly to simplicity; and the billhook with which it is customary to cut off useless suckers, I habitually leave in God’s hand.

The director is not a despot, but one who ‘guides our actions with his warnings and counsels’, as he says at the beginning of the *Introduction*. He refrains from commanding when he writes to Madame de Chantal: ‘These are good and suitable counsels for you, but not commands’. She would also say, at his canonisation process, that she sometimes regretted that she was not guided enough with commands. In fact, the role of the director is defined by the following response of Socrates to a disciple: ‘I will therefore take care to return you to yourself better than you are’. As he always declared to Madame de Chantal, Francis had ‘devoted himself’, put himself at the ‘service’ of the ‘most holy Christian freedom’. He fought for freedom:

You will see that I speak the truth and that I fight for a good cause when I defend the holy and lovable freedom of the spirit, which, as you know, I honour in a very special way,

provided it is true and free from dissipation and libertinism, which are nothing but a mask of freedom.

In 1616, during a retreat, Francis de Sales had the mother of Chantal do an exercise of ‘undressing’, to reduce her to ‘the lovely and holy purity and nakedness of children’. The time had come for her to take the step towards the ‘autonomy’ of the directee. He urged her, among other things, not to ‘take any nurse’ and not to keep telling him – he specified – ‘that I will always be her nurse’, and, in short, to be willing to renounce Francis’ spiritual direction. God alone suffices: ‘Have no other arms to carry you but God’s, no other breasts on which to rest but His and Providence. […] Think no more of the friendship or unity that God has established between us’. For Madame de Chantal the lesson is harsh: ‘My God! My true Father, whom you have cut deeply with your razor! Can I remain in this state of mind for long’? She now sees herself ‘stripped and naked of all that was most precious to her’. Francis also confesses: ‘And yes, I too find myself naked, thanks to Him who died naked to teach us to live naked’. Spiritual direction reaches its peak here. After such an experience, spiritual letters would become rarer and affection would be more restrained in favour of a wholly spiritual unity.