Saint Francis, promoter of culture

As the pastor of a diocese the vast majority of which was made up of illiterate villagers and mountain dwellers, heirs to an ancestral and practical culture, Francis de Sales was also the promoter of a learned culture among the intellectual elite.To convey his message, he understood that he had to get to know his audience and take account of their needs and tastes.When he spoke to people, and especially when he wrote for educated people, his method was the one he set out in the Preface to his 'Treatise on the Love of God': 'Of course, I took into consideration the condition of the minds of this century, and I had to: it is very important to consider the age in which one writes'.

Francis de Sales and popular culture

Born into a noble family with strong ties to the land, Francis de Sales was never a stranger to popular culture. The environment in which he grew up already brought him into close contact with the common people, to the extent that he himself would willingly place himself among the 'big mountain people' when they got up in the morning. During his pastoral visits, he used the patois, colloquially familiar with 'the coarse language of the country to make himself better heard'. In any case, it is certain that direct contact with the population as a whole gave his pastoral experience a concrete and warm character.

As we know, popular culture is much better expressed in narrative form than in writing. Need we remind you that while a certain percentage of the population could read, most could not write? Nevertheless, books from established booksellers and hawkers were appearing, not only in towns but also in villages. This production of inexpensive booklets must have been very varied, with the majority

undoubtedly coming from popular literature that conveyed a still medieval sensibility: lives of saints, romances of chivalry, marvellous tales, stories of brigands or almanacs with their weather forecasts and practical advice.

But popular culture was also conveyed through everyday encounters and festivals, when people went out to eat and drink together in taverns and cabarets, particularly ‘on weddings, christenings, funerals and confraternities’, and at fairs and markets. Francis de Sales may well have done society a favour by not systematically shunning all forms of conviviality and public revelry, imposing restrictions only on ecclesiastics who were obliged to keep to themselves.

Wisdom and know-how

A sympathetic observer of nature and people, François de Sales learned a great deal through his contact with them. It was the farmers and those who ploughed the land who told him that when it snows in winter, the harvest will be better the following year. As for the shepherds and herdsmen in the mountains, their care for their flocks is an example of ‘pastoral’ zeal. In the world of trades, we often discover admirable know-how:

‘*Ploughmen do not sow fields until they have cleared them and removed the thorns; masons do not use stones until they have cut them; locksmiths do not use iron until they have beaten it; goldsmiths do not use gold until it has been purified in the crucible.*’

Humour is not absent from some of the stories he tells. Since ancient times, barbers have been known as great talkers; when one of them asked a king: ‘How would you like me to do your beard? the king replied: ‘Without saying a word.’ Carpenters work small miracles: with a twisted piece of wood they can create ‘some beautiful masterpiece’. Glassmakers, too, are astonishing, creating marvels with the breath of their mouths.

As for the art of typography, he understood its importance, especially for religious purposes. In a letter to

the nuncio in Turin in May 1598, he lamented: '*There should be a printer in Annecy. Heretics are publishing very pernicious books all the time, while many Catholic works remain in the hands of their authors because they cannot be sent safely to Lyon and they have no printer at their disposal*'.

Art and artists

In the arts, the triumph of the Renaissance shone through in works inspired by antiquity. Francis de Sales was able to contemplate them during his visits to Italy and France. In Rome, during his trip in 1599, he admired the great dome of St Peter's, barely finished a few years earlier, and noted that Christian Rome had nothing to envy of pagan Rome: *Tell me, where is the memory of Nero? Everything aid about him now is bad.Oh, what is the memory of the glorious apostle Saint Peter, a poor fisherman, barefoot and simple!Great is the palace, the basilica, the monument of Saint Peter; that of Nero is nothing.*

At the time, classical sculpture was the object of the greatest admiration, so much so, he said, that even 'the parts of ancient statues are kept as a reminder of antiquity'. He himself mentions several sculptors of antiquity, starting with Phidias: he, who 'never represented anything so perfectly as the divinities', 'made a statue of Minerva, all of ivory, twenty-six cubits high in Athens', and on his shield 'he engraved his own face with such art that not a single strand of his image could be removed,' says Aristotle, 'without the whole statue collapsing'. Here is Polyclitus, 'my Polyclitus, who is so dear to me', he said, whose 'master hand' worked on the bronze. Francis de Sales also evoked the Colossus of Rhodes, symbol of divine providence, in whom there is 'neither change nor a shadow of vicissitude'.

Now we come to the famous painters mentioned by Pliny and Plutarch: Aurelius, a man who 'painted all the faces of the images he made in the air and likeness of the women he loved'; the 'unique Apelles', Alexander the Great's favourite painter; Timanthe, who veiled Agamemnon's head because he

despaired of being able to convey the consternation on his face at the death of his daughter Iphigenia; Protogenes, who ‘made an excellent masterpiece of an admirable satyr who enjoyed playing the flageolet’.

He was especially attracted to religious painting, which was strongly recommended by his former spiritual director Possevin, who sent him his ‘charming work’ *De poesi et pictura*. He considered himself a painter, because, as he wrote in the preface to *his Introduction to the Devout Life*, ‘God wants me to paint not only the common virtues, but also his very dear and beloved devotion on people’s hearts’.

Francis de Sales also loved singing and music. We know that he had hymns sung during catechism classes, but we would like to know what was sung in his cathedral. Once, in a letter, the day after a ceremony where a text from the *Song of Songs* had been sung, he exclaimed: ‘Ah! how well it was sung yesterday in our church and in my heart! He knew and appreciated the differences between instruments: ‘Among instruments, drums and trumpets make more noise, but lutes and spinet instruments make more melody; the sound of one is louder, and the other more suave and spiritual’.

The Florimontane Academy (1606)

“The city of Annecy,” wrote his nephew Charles-Auguste de Sales pompously, “was similar to Athens under such a great prelate as Francis de Sales, and under such a great president as Antoine Favre, and was inhabited by a large number of doctors, either theologians or lawyers, or people well versed in humanities.”

People have wondered how Francis de Sales came up with the idea of founding an academy with his friend Antoine Favre at the end of 1606, which they called ‘Florimontane’, ‘because the Muses flourished in the mountains of Savoy’. Coming into existence in Italy at the end of the 14th century, the academies had spread far and wide across the Alps. It should not be forgotten that the Calvinists in Geneva had their own, and this must have played a major role in the

creation of a Catholic rival.

The Florimontane Academy had its own emblem: an orange tree, admired by Francis de Sales because it was full of flowers and fruit almost all year round (*flores fructusque perennes*). In fact, explained Francis, 'in Italy, on the coast of Genova, and even in these countries of France, as in Provence, along the shores you can see it bearing its leaves, flowers and fruit in every season'.

The Academy was made up of recognised scholars and masters, but public lectures were planned to give it the air of a small people's university. Indeed, the general assemblies could be attended by 'all brave masters of the honest arts, such as painters, sculptors, carpenters, architects and the like'.

We can guess that the aim of the two founders was to bring together the intellectual elite of Savoy and to place literature, the sciences and the arts at the service of faith and piety in accordance with the ideal of Christian humanism. The meetings were held in Antoine Favre's home, where his children helped to welcome the guests. So there was something of a family atmosphere. In fact, as one article put it, 'all the academicians will maintain a mutual and fraternal love'.

The Academy got off to a brilliant and promising start. In 1610, no more than three years after its beginnings, Antoine Favre was appointed President of the Senate of Savoy and left for Chambéry. The bishop, for his part, was unable to maintain the Académie on his own, and it declined and disappeared. But while its existence was short-lived, its influence was enduring. The cultural project that had given rise to it was taken up by the Barnabites, who arrived at Annecy College in 1614. It is sometimes said that the Florimontane Academy inspired Cardinal Richelieu to create the Académie Française.

A Galileo affair in Annecy?

The Collège d'Annecy was famous for Father Baranzano. This Barnabite from Piedmont, who embraced the new

scientific theories, was a brilliant teacher who aroused the admiration and even the enthusiasm of his pupils. In 1617, without the permission of his superiors, his disciples published a summary of his lectures, in which he developed Copernicus' planetary system and the ideas of Galileo. The book in question immediately caused such a stir that the author was recalled to Milan by his superiors.

In September 1617, Bishop de Sales wrote a letter to his superior general asking him to return to Annecy, where he was 'much appreciated' and 'very useful'. The bishop's wish was granted and Father Baranzano returned to Annecy at the end of October that year. In 1618, the religious published a pamphlet to make amends for his mistake, but there is no evidence that he renounced his ideas.

In 1619, he published *Novae opiniones physicae* in Lyon, the first volume of the second part of an ambitious *Summa philosophica anneciensis*. The bishop gave his official approval to 'this erudite work by an erudite man', and authorised its printing. It should be noted that Baranzano acquired an international reputation and came into contact with Francis Bacon, the English promoter of the reform of the sciences, with the German astronomer Johannes Kepler, and with Galileo himself. It was a time when Galileo was being recklessly prosecuted in order to safeguard the authority of the Bible, which had been compromised by the new theories on the rotation of the earth around the sun.

While Cardinal Bellarmine was worried about the dangers of the new theories, for François de Sales there could be no contradiction between reason and faith. And was not the sun the symbol of celestial love around which everything moves, and the centre of devotion?

Religious poetry

The Renaissance had rehabilitated ancient, pagan poetry, which François had studied at school, and from which the Jesuits had expunged the most disturbing passages for young sensibilities. As a young man, he had been seduced by

the biblical poetry of the *Song of Songs* and the *Psalms*, which would accompany him throughout his life. He himself wrote a number of religious poems that have come down to us.

The fact remains that it was not a few rather clumsy verses that ensured his literary reputation, which, during his lifetime, was sufficiently established for writers and poets to seek contact with him. Such was the case with the Provençal magistrate and poet Jean de la Ceppède, one of the great exponents of Baroque religious poetry, who sent him a copy of his *Théorèmes sur le sacré mystère de la Rédemption*. What delighted him most in this poet's verses was that he had succeeded in 'transforming the pagan muses into Christians, to remove them from this old Parnassus and lodge them on the new sacred Calvary'.

Francis de Sales knew and admired the power of poetry, 'for it is marvellous how much power discourse compressed into the laws of verse has to penetrate hearts and subdue memory'. In 1616, the Lyonnais poet René Gros de Saint-Joyre sent him his manuscript of *La mire de vie à l'amour parfait*, a poem in French verse divided into stanzas of eight lines, dedicated to the abbess of the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Pierre de Lyon.

By the Basque-born poet and humanist Jean de Sponde, he cites not the *Sonnets d'amour* or the *Stances sur la mort*, but the *Réponse au Traité des marques de l'Église by Théodore de Bèze* and the *Déclaration* sur les motifs de la conversion by this former Calvinist, whom he considered a 'great mind'. He was also in contact with the Burgundian poet and memoirist Jean de Lacurne, who was considered 'the delight of Apollo and all the Muses', and to whom he declared: 'I make much of your writings'.

Learned culture and theology

He also asked about the theological books that were appearing. After having 'seen with extreme pleasure' a draft of the *Somme de théologie*, he took the liberty of giving the author some advice. His opinion was that it was necessary

to cut out all the ‘methodical’, ‘superfluous’ and ‘importunate’ words, to prevent the *Summa* from becoming too ‘fat’, to ensure that it was ‘nothing but juice and marrow’, by making it ‘more palatable and pleasant’, and not to be afraid of using the ‘affective style’.

Later, writing to one of his priests who was engaged in literary and scientific work, he made more or less the same recommendations. It was necessary, according to him, to take into account ‘the mood of the world’, ‘to write to the taste of this poor world’, and ‘to treat pious and holy things in a pleasant, historical way and which charmed a little the curiosity of the spirits of the time’. To write ‘to the taste of this poor world’ meant agreeing to use certain means capable of arousing the interest of the reader of the time:
Sir, we are fishermen, and fishers of men.We must therefore use not only care, work and vigilance in this fishing, but also bait, tricks, lures, yes even, if I dare say, holy tricks.The world is becoming so delicate that from now on we will only dare to touch it with musk gloves, or dress its wounds with civet plasters; but what does it matter, as long as men are healed and saved at last?Our queen, charity, does everything for her children.

Another fault, especially among theologians, was the lack of clarity, to the point where one felt like writing on the first page of certain works: *Fiat lux*. His friend, Bishop Camus, recalls this comment by his hero about the work of an illegible author: ‘This man has given several books to the public, but I don’t realise that he has brought any of them to light. It’s a great pity to be so learned and yet not be able to express oneself. It’s like those women who are pregnant with several children and can’t give birth to any of them. He added with conviction: ‘Above all, long live clarity; without it nothing can be pleasant’. According to Camus, the works of Francis de Sales certainly contain difficulties, but obscurity is a flaw that was never found on his pen.

A writer full of projects

Towards the end of his life, his pen was still busy with numerous projects. Michel Favre has stated that he planned to write a treatise *De l'amour du prochain*, as well as a *Histoire théandrique*, in which 'he wanted to describe the life of Our Lord humanised and suggest ways of easily practising the evangelical maxims'. According to his confidant and future biographer, Dom Jean de Saint-François, the *Histoire théandrique* was to consist of four books: a 'clear and vulgar version of the four evangelists united and allied together in a manner of concordance', a demonstration 'of the principal points of the creed of the Catholic Church', an 'instruction in good morals and the practice of Christian virtues', and finally a history of the Acts of the Apostles to show 'what the face of the primitive Church was at its birth, and the order and conduct that the Holy Spirit and the apostles established in it at its first beginning'.

He also had in mind a *Book of the four loves*, in which he wanted to teach how we should love God, love ourselves, love our friends and love our enemies; a book of the *evangelical maxims*, as well as a *familiar explanation of the mysteries of our holy faith*.

None of these works will ever see the light of day. I shall die like pregnant women,' he wrote, 'without producing what I have conceived. His 'philosophy' was that 'you have to take on much more than you know what to do with, and as if you were going to live a long time, but don't worry about doing more than if you were going to die tomorrow'.

St Francis de Sales at the

service of education

Francis de Sales was convinced that ‘on the good or bad education of the youth depends radically the well-being or malaise of society and the state’; he also believed ‘that colleges are like nurseries and seminaries, from which come out those who will later fill offices and hold positions, destined to be administered well or badly to the extent that previously the grafts have been well or badly cultivated’. He therefore wanted ‘youth to be educated equally in piety and morals, as in letters and sciences.

School, boarding school and vocational training in Thonon

The formation of youth in studies and the Catholic faith was particularly urgent in Thonon, a town near Geneva. Several projects occupied the spirit of Francis de Sales for many years, at the time when he was provost and later as bishop.

Before the town’s return to Catholicism, there was a school in Thonon founded thanks to a bequest that ensured sufficient resources for the education of twelve schoolchildren. In 1579, education was provided there by two or three governesses. With the restoration of Catholicism in Thonon in 1598, the provost de Sales asked that the bequest be used for twelve pupils ‘who were Catholics’.

But the project that was closest to the provost’s heart was to bring the fathers of the Society of Jesus to Thonon: ‘Whoever would add to this a Jesuit college in this town, would make the whole of the surrounding area, which, as far as religion is concerned, is almost completely indifferent, participate in this good. The provost prepared a *Memoir* in which he strongly affirmed the general conviction: ‘There is nothing more useful for this province of Chablais than to build a college of the Society of Jesus in the town of Thonon’.

At the end of October 1599 the first Jesuit

arrived, at the end of November a second and the others were on their way from Avignon. Towards the end of the year, the Jesuits who arrived in Thonon began with a ‘little school’, which would have one hundred and twenty pupils the following year. As a result of the turmoil in 1600, they were dispersed for several months, after which they started schools again with about three hundred pupils.

But what use would grammar schools be if, for humanity’s sake, pupils were forced to attend Protestant colleges? There was an urgent need to create secondary and higher classes in philosophy, theology, Holy Scripture and law. At the beginning of December 1602, everything seemed ready for the opening of the college and future university of Thonon. Now, a few days later, the failed attempt by the Duke of Savoy to retake Geneva caused the Jesuits to leave again. They were soon forced to withdraw permanently.

After the Jesuits’ departure, the school was revived with the help of local staff. The college of Thonon would not see any real development until late 1615, when the bishop called on the congregation of Barnabites, already established in the college of Annecy.

While literary studies were being provided for, another project mobilised the energies of the provost and his collaborators. In 1599, François de Sales advocated the foundation of a ‘residence of all sciences and arts’, i.e. a kind of professional school with a printing press, a paper factory, a mechanics workshop, a passementerie and an armoury.

The idea of an institution for training in the ‘arts and crafts’ should be emphasised, because learning normally took place at home, with the father teaching his trade to the son destined to succeed him, or with a craftsman. On the other hand, it can be seen that Francis de Sales and his collaborators were interested in manual trades considered vile, which the majority of humanists seemed to ignore. Promoting the ‘mechanical arts’ also meant valuing the craftsmen that the elites tended to despise.

The small schools in the diocese

In 1606, there were fifteen boys' schools in the diocese, where grammar, literature and catechism were taught. On the surface, this was little. In reality, literacy was fairly widespread in the parishes; short courses were organised at certain times of the year, especially in the winter season, thanks to temporary agreements with teachers and especially thanks to the goodwill of the parish priests and assistant priests.

Teaching was elementary and consisted first of all in learning to read by means of a spelling book. The teacher usually did not have his own room, but used any room, a stable or a stable. Sometimes 'his lessons, held in the open air, even at an altitude of 1500 or 2000 metres, with pupils sitting on a stone, a cart, a fir-tree trunk or on the arms of a plough, were not without charm and picturesqueness'.

As one can guess, the teachers were generally recruited from among the diocesan clergy and religious. In the will of a certain Nicolas Clerc, it is stipulated that the parish service 'shall be performed by a rector capable of instructing the youth up to and including grammar'; should he 'digress and neglect the divine office or the instruction of the youth, after being admonished three times' and 'referred to the bishop', he shall be deprived of his income and replaced by another clergyman.

In 1616, the bishop accepted the request of the principals of the town of Bonne, who begged him to provide them with a monk from a neighbouring convent, entrusting him with 'instructing the youth in letters and piety', 'in view of the great fruit and usefulness that can be derived from it in view of the good instruction that he has begun to give to the youth of the said town and its neighbourhood, who intend to send their own children there'.

The boarding schools

Secondary education provided in boarding schools in Savoy originated mostly through the development of primary

schools, which, thanks to donations, were able to add Latin, grammar and fine arts classes.

The bishop intervened to save the college of La Roche, where he had done his first grammar studies. The college did not always enjoy quiet days. In 1605, Francis de Sales wrote to the canons of the collegiate church to silence 'the personal opinion' of some, begging them to 'again secure the general consensus': 'you can and must contribute,' he wrote them, 'not only with your voices, but also with your warnings and the work of conviction, since the erection and preservation of this college will serve the glory of God and the Church', and will also procure 'the good of this city'. The spiritual purpose was, yes, in first place, but the temporal good was not forgotten.

In Annecy, the bishop followed closely the life of the college founded by Eustache Chappuis, in which he himself had studied from 1575 to 1578. The difficulties he was experiencing probably led him to visit this institute frequently. Moreover, the presence of the bishop was a sought-after honour, especially on the occasion of philosophical disputes, to which 'Monsignor, the most reverend bishop of Geneva' was invited.

The records of the college's decisions indicate his presence on the occasion of discussions as well as interventions to support requests or to draw up contracts with professors. According to one witness, the bishop went there early in the morning to attend 'public events, disputes, performances of historical events and other exercises, to encourage the youth, and, in particular, public disputes in philosophy at the end of the courses'. The same witness adds: 'I often saw him personally take part in philosophical disputes'.

In reality, according to one of the professors of the time, 'fine literature as well as healthy morals had lost much of their lustre' and income had declined. The administration was experiencing shocks. The bishop dreamed of a new and stable direction for the college, which appeared to

him ‘almost like a wasteland’.

In 1613, while passing through Turin, he was suggested the name of a new congregation that was sailing with the wind in its sails: the Barnabites. In Milan, he met their superior general and the deal was concluded. In December 1614, he signed the contract for the Barnabites to enter the Chappuis college.

Francis de Sales was so pleased with the Barnabites that, as we have said, he called them without delay to Thonon. In April 1615, he was able to write to a friend of his: ‘Certainly, our good Barnabites are really very good people: sweeter than can be said, compliant, humble and gentle far more than is fashionable in their country’. Consequently, he suggested that they should also come to France:

‘For me, I think that, one day, they will be of great service to France, because they do good not only by the instruction of the youth (which is not excessively necessary in a country where the Jesuit fathers do it so excellently), but they sing in choir, hear confessions, give catechism even in the villages to which they are sent, preach; in a word, they do all that can be desired, they do it very cordially, and they do not ask much for their livelihood.

In 1619 he was involved in negotiations to have the Barnabites take charge of the college in Beaune, Burgundy. Since this deal failed, they were able to settle in Montargis the following year.

Higher studies

The Duchy of Savoy, being unable to count on large cities and seeing its stability often threatened, did not have its own university. Students who were able to do so went to study abroad. Francis de Sales’ brother Louis was sent to Rome to study law there. In France, there were Savoyard students in Montpellier, where they went to study medicine, and in Toulouse, where they went to study law.

In Avignon, the Savoyard Cardinal de Brogny had

founded a college in his palace to receive twenty-four law students free of charge, sixteen of whom were from Savoy. Unfortunately, the Savoyards lost the places reserved for them. In October 1616, Francis de Sales made several attempts with the Duke of Savoy and also in Rome to find ‘some effective remedy against the disorders that, in the same college, have occurred’ and so that the seats in the college would be returned to ‘Your Highness’ subjects’. On the occasion of his last journey, which took him to Avignon in November 1621 and before he finally ended it in Lyons, he spoke at length with the pope’s vice-legate to once again defend the Savoyard interests of the college.

Savoyard students were even to be found in Louvain, where Eustache Chappuis had founded a college for Savoyards attending the university. The Bishop of Geneva was in constant and friendly contact with Jacques de Bay, president of the college; on several occasions Francis de Sales wrote to him to recommend those who went there to place themselves, as he said, ‘under your wings’. In cases where parents encountered difficulties in bearing the costs, he said he was ready to reimburse them. He followed his students: ‘Study more and more,’ he wrote to one of them, ‘with a spirit of diligence and humility’. We also possess a letter from 1616 to the new president of the college, Jean Massen, in favour of a theology student, his own relative, whose ‘progress in letters and virtue’ he hoped for.

Schools for girls?

All that has been said so far only concerns the education of boys. It was only for them that schools existed. And for girls? At the time of François de Sales, the only institutions that could offer help to families in this respect were women’s monasteries, which were, however, primarily concerned with recruitment. Jeanne de Sales, the last daughter of Madame de Boisy, was sent to the monastery in 1605, ‘to give her a change of air and give her a taste for devotion’. She entered at the age of twelve, but as she felt no

attraction for religious life, it is not reasonable, asserted Francis de Sales, ‘to leave a young girl who does not intend to stay there forever for so long in a monastery’. She withdrew already in her second year.

But what to do if the monastery was closed to them? There was the solution of the Ursulines, who were beginning to be known as a congregation for the education of young women. They had been present in the French capital since 1608. The bishop encouraged their coming to Chambéry, writing in 1612 that ‘it would be a great good thing if, in Chambéry, there were Ursulines, and I would like to contribute by doing something for this’; ‘three daughters or courageous women would be enough,’ he added, ‘to begin’. The foundation would not take place in the ancient capital of Savoy until 1625.

In 1614, he was able to rejoice at the recent arrival of the Ursulines in Lyon, ‘one of the congregations,’ he said, ‘that my spirit loves most’. He also wanted them in his diocese, particularly in Thonon. In January 1621, he wrote to the superior of the Ursulines of Besançon to try to encourage this project, because, he wrote, ‘I have always loved, esteemed and honoured those works of great charity that your congregation uses to practise, and therefore, I have always deeply desired its diffusion also in this province of Savoy’. The project, however, could only be implemented in 1634.

The education of young girls in the Visitation monasteries

When, starting in 1610, Francis de Sales founded with Jeanne de Chantal what was to become the Order of the Visitation, the question of the admission and education of young women destined or not destined for religious life soon arose. We know the case of the daughter of the Lady of Chantal, the cheerful and coquettish *Franceschetta*, who was only eleven years old when her mother, wanting her to become a religious, took her with her into the house that was to become the home of the first Visitandine. But the young girl had to take another path. Girls sent to monasteries unwillingly had

no choice but to make themselves unbearable.

In 1614, a nine-year-old girl, daughter of the guardian of the castle of Annecy, was accepted at the first Visitation monastery. At the age of fourteen, by dint of insistence, she was allowed to wear the religious habit, but without having the requisites to be a novice. Sick with lung disease, she aroused the admiration of the founder, who felt 'an incredible consolation, finding her indifferent to death and life, in a gentle attitude of patience and with a smiling face, in spite of the very high fever and the many pains she suffered. As her only consolation, she asked to be allowed to make her profession before she died'. Very different, however, was another companion, a young woman from Lyons, daughter of the chief merchant and great benefactor, who made herself unbearable in the community to the point that Chantal's mother had to correct her.

At the Visitation in Grenoble, a twelve-year-old girl asked to live with the religious. To the superior, who hesitated to accept this 'rose' who might bear some thorns, the founder advised with a smile and a hint of cunning:

'It is true that these young girls do give some thorns; but what should one do?In this world, I have never found a good that did not cost something.We must arrange our wills in such a way that they do not seek comforts, or, if they seek them and desire them, know how to adapt themselves serenely to the difficulties that are always inseparable from comforts.In this world, we have no wine without a bottom.We must therefore calculate well.Is it better that we have thorns in our garden so that we can have roses, or that we have no roses so that we do not have thorns?If it brings more good than evil, it will be good to admit it; if it brings more evil than good, it should not be admitted.

In the end, the founder was very circumspect about admitting young girls into the Visitation monasteries, because of the incompatibility with the way of life of religious

women.

In fact, the Visitation had not been conceived and desired for such a work: ‘God,’ the founder wrote to the superior of Nevers, ‘has not chosen your institute for the education of little girls, but for the perfection of the women and young ladies who are called to it at the age when they are already able to answer for what they do’. He was well aware that monastery life could hardly provide a suitable environment for the development of girls: ‘Not only experience, but also reason teaches us that girls so young, placed under the discipline of a monastery, generally disproportionate for their age, begin to detest and hate it’.

Despite some regrets, Francis de Sales did not become the founder of an institute dedicated to education. However, it is a fact that his efforts in favour of the education and upbringing of boys and girls, in all its forms, were numerous and burdensome. The overriding motive that guided him was spiritual, especially when it came to keeping the youth away from the ‘poison of heresy’, and in this regard he succeeded rather well, as the Catholic Reformation gained ground; however, he did not neglect the temporal good of educating the youth for the benefit of society.

St Francis de Sales catechises the children

Formed in Christian doctrine from childhood, in his family environment, then in schools, and finally in contact with the Jesuits, Francis de Sales had perfectly assimilated the content and method of the catechesis of the time.

A catechism experience in Thonon

How to catechise the youth of Thonon who had grown up all steeped in Calvinism, the missionary from Chablais wondered. Authoritarian means were not necessarily the most effective. Was it not better to attract the youth and interest them? This was the method usually followed by the provost of Sales during his time as a missionary in the Chablais.

He had also attempted an experience that deserves to be remembered. On 16 July 1596, taking advantage of the visit of his two young brothers, Jean-François aged eighteen and Bernard aged thirteen, he organised a kind of public recitation of the catechism in order to attract the youth in Thonon. He composed a text himself in the form of questions and answers on the fundamental truths of the faith, and invited his brother Bernard to respond.

The catechist's method is interesting. When reading this little dialogue catechism, one must remember that it is not simply a written text, but a dialogue intended to be performed before an audience of young people in the form of a "little theatre". The "performance" actually took place on a "stage", or podium, as was the custom among the Jesuits in the college of Clermont. In fact, there are stage directions at the beginning:

Francis, speaking first, will say: My brother, are you a Christian?!
Bernard, placed vis-à-vis Francis, will answer: Yes, my brother, by the grace of God.!

Most probably the author envisaged the use of gestures to make the recitation more lively. To the question "How many things must you know to be saved?" the answer reads "As many as there are fingers on one hand!", an expression that Bernard had to pronounce with gestures, i.e. pointing to the five fingers of the hand: the thumb for faith, the index finger for hope, the middle finger for charity, the ring finger for the sacraments, the little finger for good works.

Similarly, when dealing with the different anointings of baptism, Bernard had to place his hand first on his chest, to indicate that the first anointing consists in “being embraced by the love of God”; then on his shoulders, because the second anointing is intended to “make us strong in carrying the weight of the divine commandments and precepts”; finally on his forehead to reveal that the purpose of the last anointing is to “make us confess our faith in Our Lord publicly, without fear and without shame.”

Great importance is given to the “sign of the cross”, normally accompanied by the formula In the name of the Father with which he began the catechism, a sign that with the gesture of the hand follows, on the parts of the body, an inverted path compared to the baptismal anointing: the forehead, the chest and the two shoulders. The sign of the cross, Bernard was to say, is “the true sign of the Christian”, adding that “the Christian must make it in all his prayers and in his principal actions.”

It is also worth noting that the systematic use of numbers served as a mnemonic. In this way, the individual learns that there are three baptismal promises (renounce the devil, profess the faith and keep the commandments), twelve articles of the Creed, ten commandments of God, three types of Christians (heretics, bad Christians and true Christians), four parts of the body to be anointed (the breast, the two shoulders and the forehead), three anointings, five things necessary to be saved (faith, hope, charity, sacraments and good works), seven sacraments and three good works (prayer, fasting and almsgiving).

If we carefully examine the content of this dialogical catechism, it is easy to detect its insistence on several points contested by Protestants. The strong tone of certain statements recalls Thonon’s proximity to Geneva and the polemical zeal of the time.

From the very beginning there is an invocation to the “blessed Virgin Mary”. On the subject of the observance of the Ten Commandments, it is specified that the precepts of

“our holy Mother Church” must be added. In the three types of Christians, heretics are those who “have nothing but the name”, “being outside the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church”. The sacraments are seven in number. The rites and ceremonies of the Church are not just symbolic actions, they produce a real change in the believer’s soul due to the efficacy of grace. One also notes the insistence on “good works” to be saved and the practice of the “holy sign of the Cross”.

Despite the rather exceptional “staging” involving his younger brother, this type of catechesis had to be repeated often and in fairly similar forms. It is known, in fact, that the Apostle of the Chablais “taught catechism, as often as possible, in public or in some homes.”

The catechist bishop

Having become bishop of Geneva, but resident in Annecy, Francis de Sales taught catechism to children himself. He had to set an example to canons and parish priests who hesitated to stoop to this type of ministry: it is well known, he would one day say, that “many want to preach, but few teach catechism.” According to one witness, the bishop “took the trouble to teach catechism in person for two years in the city, without being helped by others.”

A witness describes him seated “on a small theatre created for the purpose, and, while there, he interrogated, listened, and taught not only his small audience, but also all those who flocked from all sides, welcoming them with an incredible ease and friendliness” His attention was focused on the personal relationships to be established with the children: before questioning them, “he called them all by name, as if he had the list in his hand.”

To make himself understood, he used simple language, sometimes drawing the most unexpected comparisons from everyday life, such as that of the little dog: “When we come into the world, how are we born? We are born like little dogs, who, licked by their mother, open their eyes. So, when

we are born, our holy mother Church opens our eyes with baptism and the Christian doctrine she teaches us."

With the help of a few co-workers, the bishop prepared "tickets" on which were written the main points to be learnt by heart during the week in order to be able to recite them on Sundays. But how could this be done if the children could not yet read and their families were also illiterate? It was necessary to count on the help of benevolent people: parish priests, vice-parish priests, schoolteachers, who would be available during the week to tutor them.

As a good educator, he often repeated the same questions with the same explanations. When the child made a mistake reciting his notes or pronouncing difficult words, "he would smile so kindly and, correcting the mistake, would put the questioner back on track in such a lovely way that it seemed that if he had not made a mistake, he could not have pronounced it so well; which doubled the courage of the little ones and singularly increased the satisfaction of the older ones."

The traditional pedagogy of emulation and reward had its place in the interventions of this former Jesuit pupil. A witness relates this skit: "The little ones ran about, exultant with joy, competing against each other; they were proud when they could receive from the hands of the Blessed some little gift such as little pictures, medals, rosaries and *agnus dei*, which he gave them when they had responded well, and also special caresses that he gave them to encourage them to learn the catechism well and to respond correctly."

Now, this catechesis to children attracted adults, and not only parents, but also great personalities, "doctors, chamber presidents, councillors and masters, religious and superiors of monasteries." All social strata were represented, "nobles, clergymen and ordinary people", and the crowd was so packed that "one could not move." People flocked from the city and the surrounding area.

A movement had therefore been created, a kind of

contagious phenomenon. According to some, “it was no longer the catechism of children, but the public education of the entire people.” The comparison with the movement created in Rome half a century earlier by the lively and joyful assemblies of St Philip Neri comes spontaneously to mind. In the words of Father Lajeunie, “the Oratory of Saint Philip seemed to be reborn in Annecy.”

The bishop was not content with formulas learnt by heart, although it was far from him to deprecate the role of memory. He insisted that children know what they must believe and understand the teaching.

Above all, he wanted the theory learned during catechism to become practical in everyday life. As one of his biographers wrote, “he taught not only what one must believe, but also persuaded one to live according to what one believes.” He encouraged his hearers of all ages “to approach the sacraments of confession and communion frequently”, “taught them personally the way to prepare themselves appropriately”, and “explained the commandments of the Decalogue and of the Church, the deadly sins, using appropriate examples, similes and exhortations so lovingly engaging, that all felt gently compelled to do their duty and embrace the virtue taught them.”

In any case, the catechist bishop was delighted with what he was doing. When he found himself among the children, says one witness, he seemed “to be among his delights.” On leaving one of these catechism schools, at carnival time, he took up his pen to describe it to Jeanne de Chantal:

I have just finished the catechism class where I indulged a little in merriment, having fun with masks and dances to make the audience laugh; I was in good humour, and a large audience invited me with its applause to continue being a child with the children. They tell me that I succeed in this, and I believe it!

He liked to recount the beautiful expressions of the children, sometimes astounding in their depth. In the letter just quoted, he related to the Baroness the answer he had just been given to the question: Is Jesus Christ ours? “One should not doubt it in the least: Jesus Christ is ours,” a little girl had answered him, who added: “Yes, he is more mine than I am his and more than I am mine myself.”

St Francis de Sales and his “little world”

The familiar, warm and joyful atmosphere that reigned during catechism was an important success factor, encouraged by the natural harmony that existed between Francis’ limpid loving soul and the children, whom he called his “little world”, because he had managed to “win their hearts”.

As he walked through the streets, the children ran ahead of him; he was sometimes seen to be so surrounded by them that he could go no further. Far from becoming irritated, he would caress them, entertain himself with them, asking: “Whose son are you? What is your name?”

According to his biographer, he would one day say “that he would like to have the pleasure of seeing and considering how a child’s spirit gradually opens and expands.”

St Francis de Sales forms his collaborators

Francis de Sales did not wish to become a bishop. “I was not born to command,” he allegedly told a confrere, who encouraged him, saying “But everyone wants you!” He accepted when he recognised God’s will in the opinion of the Duke, of Bishop de Granier, the clergy and the people. He was

consecrated bishop of Geneva on 8 December 1602 in the small church in his parish in Thorens. In a letter to Jane de Chantal, he wrote that, on that day, “God had taken me from myself to take me for himself, and thus, give me to the people, meaning that he had transformed me from what I was for me into what I should be for them.”

To fulfil the pastoral mission entrusted to him and aimed at serving “this miserable and afflicted diocese of Geneva”, he needed collaborators. Of course, according to the circumstances he liked to call all the faithful “my brothers and my collaborators”, but this was directed all the more to the members of the clergy, his “confreres”. The reform of the people called for by the Council of Trent could indeed begin with them and through them.

The pedagogy of example

First and foremost, the bishop had to set an example: the pastor had to become the model for the flock entrusted to him, and first and foremost for the clergy. To this end, Francis de Sales imposed upon himself an Episcopal Rule. Drafted in the third person, it stipulated not only the strictly religious duties of the pastoral office, but also the practice of a number of social virtues, such as simplicity of life, habitual care of the poor, good manners and decency. From the very beginning, we read an article against ecclesiastical vanity:

Firstly, as regards external behaviour Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, will not wear silk robes, nor robes that are more precious than those hitherto worn; however, they will be clean, well tailored so as to be worn with propriety around the body.

In his episcopal household he would content himself with two clerics and a few servants, often very young. They too would be formed in simplicity, courtesy and a sense of welcome. The table would be frugal, but neat and clean. His

house must be open to all, because “the house of a bishop must be like a public fountain,where the poor and the rich have the same right to approach to draw water.”

In addition, the bishop must continue to be formed and to study: “He will make sure that he learns something every day that is in any case useful and appropriate for his profession.” As a rule, he would devote two hours to study, between seven and nine in the morning, and after dinner he was able to read for an hour. He recognised that he enjoyed studying, but it was indispensable to him: he considered himself a “perpetual student of theology”.

Knowing people and situations

A bishop of this stature could not content himself with being merely a good administrator. To lead the flock, the shepherd must know the flock, and to know the exact situation of the diocese and the clergy in particular, Francis de Sales undertook an impressive series of pastoral visits. In 1605, he visited 76 parishes in the French part of the diocese and returned “after beating the countryside for six weeks without interruption”. The following year, a large pastoral tour lasting several months took him to 185 parishes, surrounded by “frightful mountains, covered with a sheet of ice ten to twelve inches thick”. In 1607, he was in 70 parishes and, in 1608, he put an end to the official visits of his diocese by moving to 20 parishes around Annecy, but he continued to make many more visits in 1610 to Annecy and the surrounding parishes. In the course of six years, he would have visited 311 parishes with their branches.

Thanks to these visits and personal contacts, he acquired a precise knowledge of the real situation and the concrete needs of the population. He observed the ignorance and lack of priestly spirit of certain priests, not to mention the scandals of some monasteries where the Rule was no longer observed. Worship reduced to a function and tainted by the pursuit of profit, recalled all too often the bad examples taken from the Bible: “We resemble Nabal and Absalom, who

rejoiced only in the shearing of the flock."

Widening his view of the Church, he went so far as to denounce the vanity of certain prelates, true "courtiers of the Church" whom he compared to crocodiles and chameleons: "The crocodile is an animal that is sometimes terrestrial and sometimes aquatic, it gives birth on earth and hunts in the water; this is how the courtiers of the Church behave. Trees drop their leaves after the solstice: the elm, the lime, the poplar, the olive, the willow; the same happens among churchmen."

To the complaints about the behaviour of the clergy he added reproaches for their weakness in the face of injustices committed by the temporal power. Recalling some brave bishops of the past, he exclaimed: 'Oh! how I would like to see some Ambrose commanding Theodosius, some Chrysostom scolding Eudoxia, some Hilary correcting Constantius! If one is to believe a confidence of his mother Angelica Arnauld, Bishop de Sales also groaned about the "unrest in the Curia of Rome", true "tearful topics", well convinced however that "to speak of them to the world in the situation in which it finds itself, is a cause of useless scandal."

Selection and formation of candidates

The renewal of the Church entailed an effort to discern and form future priests, very numerous at the time. During the first pastoral visit in 1605, the bishop received 175 young candidates; the following year he had 176; in less than two years he had met 570 candidates for the priestly ministry or novices in monasteries.

The evil stemmed primarily from the absence of vocation in a good number of them. Often the attraction of temporal benefit or the desire of families to place their second-born sons was pre-eminent. In each case, discernment was required to assess whether the vocation came "from heaven or from earth".

The Bishop of Geneva took the decrees of the Council of Trent very seriously, which had provided for the

creation of seminaries. Formation had to begin at an early age. As early as 1603, an attempt was made to set up an embryonic minor seminary in Thonon. Adolescents were few in number, probably due to lack of means and space. In 1618, Francis de Sales proposed to appeal directly to the authority of the Holy See to obtain legal and financial support for his project. He wanted to erect a seminary, he wrote, in which the candidates could “learn to observe ceremonies, to catechise and exhort, to sing and exercise the other clerical virtues” All his efforts, however, were in vain due to a lack of material resources.

How to ensure the formation of future priests in such conditions? Some attended colleges or universities abroad, while the majority were formed in canonries, under the guidance of a wise and educated priest or in monasteries. Francis de Sales wanted every major centre of the diocese to have a “theologian”, i.e. a member of the cathedral chapter in charge of teaching sacred Scripture and theology.

Ordination, however, was preceded by an examination and before being assigned a parish (with the attached benefice), the candidate had to pass an exam. The bishop attended and personally questioned the candidate to ensure that he possessed the required knowledge and moral qualities.

Ongoing formation

Formation was not to stop at the moment of ordination or assignment to a parish. To ensure the ongoing formation of his priests, the main means at the bishop’s disposal was the annual convocation of the diocesan synod. The first day of this assembly was solemnised by a pontifical mass and a procession through the city of Annecy. On the second day, the bishop gave the floor to one of his canons, had the statutes of previous synods reread and collected the comments of the parish priests present. After this, work would begin in commissions to discuss questions concerning church discipline and the spiritual and material service of the parishes.

Since the synod constitutions contained many disciplinary and ritual norms, care for ongoing, intellectual and spiritual formation was visible in them. They referred to the canons of the ancient Councils, but especially to the decrees of the "Most Holy Council of Trent". On the other hand, they recommended reading works that dealt with pastoral care or spirituality, such as those of Gerson (probably the *Instruction of the Parish Priests to Instruct the Simple People*) and those of the Spanish Dominican Luis de Granada, author of an *Introduction to the Symbol*.

Knowledge, he wrote in his *Exhortation to Clerics*, "is the eighth sacrament of the hierarchy of the Church." The ills of the Church were mainly due to the ignorance and laziness of the clergy. Fortunately, the Jesuits arrived! Models of educated and zealous priests, these "great men", who "devour books with their incessant studies" have "re-established and consolidated our doctrine and all the holy mysteries of our faith; so that even today, thanks to their praiseworthy work, they fill the world with learned men who destroy heresy everywhere." In the conclusion, the bishop summed up his whole thinking: "Since divine Providence, without regard to my incapacity, has established me as your bishop, I exhort you to study endlessly, so that, being learned and exemplary, you may be blameless, and ready to answer all those who question you on matters of faith."

Forming preachers

Francis de Sales preached so often and so well that he was considered one of the best preachers of his time and a model for preachers. He preached not only in his diocese, but also agreed to preach in Paris, Chambéry, Dijon, Grenoble and Lyon. He also preached in Franche-Comté, in Sion in the Valais and in several towns in Piedmont, in particular Carmagnola, Mondovì, Pinerolo, Chieri and Turin.

To know his thoughts on preaching, one must refer to the letter he addressed in 1604 to Andrea Frémyot, brother of the baroness of Chantal, young archbishop of Bourges (he

was only thirty-one), who had asked him for advice on how to preach. To preach well, he said, two things are needed: knowledge and virtue. To achieve a good result, the preacher must try to instruct his hearers and touch their hearts.

To instruct them, one must always go to the source: Holy Scripture. The works of the Fathers should not be neglected; indeed, “what is the doctrine of the Fathers of the Church, if not an explanation of the Gospel and an exposition of Holy Scripture?” It is equally good to make use of the lives of the saints who make us hear the music of the Gospel. As for the great book of nature, God’s creation, the work of his Word, it constitutes an extraordinary source of inspiration if one knows how to observe and meditate on it. “It is a book,” he writes, “that contains the Word of God.” As a man of his time, brought up in the school of the classical humanists, Francis de Sales did not exclude the pagan authors of antiquity and even a hint of their mythology from his sermons, but he used them “as one uses mushrooms, that is, only to whet one’s appetite.”

Moreover, what greatly aids the understanding of preaching and makes it enjoyable is the use of images, comparisons and examples, taken from the Bible, ancient authors or personal observation. Indeed, similes possess “an incredible effectiveness when it comes to enlightening the intelligence and moving the will.”

But the real secret of effective preaching is the charity and zeal of the preacher who knows how to find the right words in the depths of his heart. One must speak “with warmth and devotion, with simplicity, with candour and with confidence, be deeply convinced of what one is teaching and inculcating in others.” Words must come from the heart rather than the mouth, because “the heart speaks to the heart, while the mouth speaks only to the ears.”

Forming confessors

Another task undertaken by Francis de Sales from the dawn of his episcopate was to draw up a series of *Advice*

for Confessors. They contain not only a doctrine on the grace of this sacrament, but also pedagogical norms directed to those who have a responsibility to guide people.

First of all, those who are called to work for the formation of consciences and the spiritual progress of others must begin with themselves, lest they deserve the reproach: “Physician, heal thyself”; and the apostle’s admonition: “You who judge others, condemn yourself.” The confessor is a judge: it is up to him to decide whether or not to absolve the sinner, taking into account the inner dispositions of the penitent and the rules in force. He is also a doctor, because “sins are spiritual illnesses and wounds”, so it is up to him to prescribe the appropriate remedies. Francis de Sales, however, emphasises that the confessor is above all a father:

Remember that the poor penitents call you father when they begin their confession and that indeed you must have a fatherly heart towards them. Receive them with immense love, patiently enduring their coarseness, ignorance, weakness, slowness of comprehension and other imperfections, never desisting to help and succour them as long as there is some hope in them that they may correct themselves.

A good confessor must be attentive to the state of each person’s life and proceed in a diversified manner, taking into account each person’s profession, “married or not, cleric or not, religious or secular, lawyer or procurator, artisan or farmer.” The type of reception, however, had to be the same for everyone. According to Chantal’s mother, he received everyone “with equal love and gentleness”: “ords and ladies, bourgeoisie, soldiers, maids, peasants, beggars, the sick, stinking convicts and abjects.”

Regarding inner dispositions, each penitent presents himself in his own way, and Francis de Sales can appeal to his own experience when he draws up a kind of typology of penitents. There are those who approach “tormented by fear and shame”, those who are “shameless and without any

fear", those who are "timid and nurture some suspicion of obtaining the forgiveness of their sins", and those who, finally, are "perplexed because they do not know how to tell their sins or because they do not know how to make their own examination of conscience."

A good way to encourage the timid penitent and to instil confidence in him is to acknowledge yourself that "you are no angel", and that "you do not find it strange that people commit sins." With the shy person it is necessary to behave with seriousness and gravity, reminding him that "at the hour of death of nothing else will he give a full account but of the confessions he has made." But above all, the Bishop of Geneva insisted on this recommendation: "Be charitable and discreet towards all penitents and especially towards women." One finds this Salesian tone in the following fragment of advice:"Beware of using words that are too harsh towards penitents; for sometimes we are so austere in our corrections that we show ourselves to be more blameworthy than those we reproach are guilty." Furthermore, try "not to impose confused but specific penances on penitents, and to be more inclined to gentleness than severity."

Form together

Finally, it is worth considering a concern of the Bishop of Geneva regarding the community aspect of formation, because he was convinced of the usefulness of encounter, mutual animation and example. We do not form well if not together; hence the desire to bring priests together and also, as far as possible, to divide them into groups. The synodal assemblies that, in Annecy, saw parish priests gathered once a year around their bishop were a good thing, even irreplaceable, but not sufficient.

To this end, the bishop of Geneva expanded the role of the "overseers", a kind of animator of pastoral sectors with the "faculty and mission to support, warn, exhort the other priests and watch over their conduct." They were in charge not only of visiting the parish priests and churches

under their jurisdiction, but also of bringing their cnfreres together twice a year to discuss pastoral issues. The bishop was very keen on these meetings, “emphasising the importance of the assemblies, and ordering his overseers to send him the registers of those present and the reasons for those absent.” According to one witness, he had them deliver “sermons on the virtues required of a priest and the duties of pastors concerning the good of the souls entrusted to them.” There was also “a spiritual conference on the difficulties that might arise concerning the meaning of the Synodal Constitutions or the means necessary to obtain better results in view of the salvation of souls.”

The desire to gather fervent priests suggested a project to him modelled on the Oblates of Saint Ambrose, founded by Saint Charles Borromeo to help him in the renewal of the clergy. Could not something similar be attempted in Savoy to encourage not only reform but also devotion among the ranks of the clergy? In fact, according to his friend Bishop Camus, Francis de Sales would have cultivated the project of creating a congregation of secular priests “free and without vows”. He renounced it when the congregation of the Oratory was founded in Paris, a society of “reformed priests” that he tried to bring to Savoy.

While his efforts were not always crowned with success they testify, in any case, to his constant concern to form his co-workers as part of an overall project for the renewal of church life.

Correcting “rebellious

children” with St Francis de Sales

In September 1594, Francis de Sales, provost of the cathedral, arrived, accompanied by his cousin, at Thonon in the Chablais, a province located south of Lake Geneva and close to Geneva, to explore the territory with the aim of possibly reconquering that province, which had been Protestant for sixty years, to Catholicism. Thus began an acute phase of confrontation with the rebellious children of the holy Church, which would mark his entire life as a man of the Church. Until his death in 1622, he would employ all the resources of an art that is also characteristic of the educator when faced with “rebellious children”.

Winning back souls

At the time of Francis de Sales, those who felt that heretics should be ‘subjected’ by force were numerous. His father, Monsieur de Boisy, was of the opinion that it was necessary to speak to these people “through the mouth of a cannon”. While the political and military strength available to the Duke of Savoy in the Chablais had enabled him to conquer “the body” of the inhabitants, what was more important to Francis de Sales, and constituted his main objective, was to conquer souls. In another word he told Philothea that “he who conquers the heart of man conquers the whole man”.

The first thing to do was to know exactly where the opponents stood. How to argue with Protestants if one has not read Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*? The young provost wrote as early as 1595 to his former spiritual director, Father Possevino:

I no longer dare in any way attack Calvin or Beza, […] without everyone wanting to know exactly where what I say stands. For this, I have already suffered two affronts, which would not have touched me, had I not trusted the quotations from books

that misled me. […] In a word, in these bailiwicks, everyone always has the 'Institutes' in hand; I find myself in a country where everyone knows their 'Institutes' by heart.

We have a list containing more than sixty forbidden books, the use of which was permitted to Francis de Sales by the Congregation of the Inquisition. It contains not only works by Calvin, Beza and various Protestant authors, but also translations of the Bible into French, Protestant catechisms, books on Calvinist controversies, treatises on Protestant theology and evangelical life, pamphlets against the pope or simply books by Catholics that were put on the index.

After science, the mission required special moral and spiritual qualities, starting with total selflessness. His friend and disciple, Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus, emphasised this attitude of detachment that was to characterise the entire life of Francis de Sales: "Although those of Geneva withheld from him all the income earmarked for ordinaries of a diocese and the proceeds of his Chapter, I never heard him complain about such withholdings." On the other hand, according to Francis de Sales, one should not worry too much about ecclesiastical goods, because, he said, "the fate of the Church's goods is like that of the beard: the more one shaves it, the more robust and thicker it grows."

His goal was purely pastoral: "He yearned for nothing else but to convert rebellious souls to the light of truth, which shines only in the true Church." When he spoke about Geneva, "whom he called his poor or beloved (terms of compassion and love), despite her rebellion", he would sometimes sigh: "*Da mihi animas, caetera tolle tibi*." understood in its literal sense, which is that of the book of Genesis (cf. Gen 14:21), such a request made to Abraham by the king of Sodom after the victory that had allowed him to recover the prisoners of war and the goods taken from the enemy, and that simply meant "Give me the people and keep all the rest", that is, the booty. But on the lips of Francis de

Sales, these words became the prayer that the missionary addressed to God to ask him for “souls”, completely renouncing material rewards and personal interests.

He himself, lacking resources (his father had cut him off during the mission in the Chablais to convince him to renounce it), wanted to earn a living from his work. He said:

When I preached the faith in the Chablais, I often ardently wished that I knew how to do something to imitate Saint Paul, who fed himself through the work of [his] hands; but I am good at nothing, except to mend my clothes in some way; it is however true that God has given me the grace not to be a burden to anyone in the Chablais; when I had nothing to feed myself, my good mother sent me linen and money in secret from Sales.

The Protestant rebellion had been caused in large part by the sins of the clergy, which is why their conversion demanded three things above all from the missionaries: prayer, charity and the spirit of sacrifice. He wrote to his friend Antoine Favre in November 1594: “Prayer, almsgiving and fasting are the three parts that make up the rope that the enemy will find to difficult to break; with divine grace, we will try to tie up this adversary with it.”

The Salesian method

The first thing to do was to put himself on the same intellectual ground as his adversaries. The least that could be said of them in this regard was that they were absolutely against philosophical and theological arguments inherited from medieval scholasticism. An important point, this, which was made by Pierre Magnin:

With all his might he avoided launching into the disputes and quarrels of scholasticism, since this was done to no avail and, for the people, the one with the loudest voice always seems to be the one who is more right. Instead, he devoted himself primarily to proposing clearly and articulately the

mysteries of our holy faith and to defending the Catholic Church against the vain beliefs of its enemies. To this end, he did not burden himself with many books, because for about ten years he used only the Bible, St Thomas's "Summa" and the Cardinal Bellarmine's "Controversies".

Indeed, while St Thomas provided him with the Catholic point of reference and "the eminent theologian" Bellarmine gave him an arsenal of evidence against the Protestants, the only basis for possible discussion was the Bible. And in this he agreed with the heretics:

Christian faith is founded on the word of God; this is what gives it the highest degree of security, because it has such eternal and infallible truth as its guarantor. Faith that rests elsewhere is not Christian. Therefore, the Word of God is the true rule of good faith, since being the foundation and rule in this field is the same thing.

Francis de Sales was very severe towards the authors and spreaders of errors, especially towards the "heresiarchs" Calvin and the Protestant ministers, towards whom, for him, no tolerance was conceivable. But he showed limitless patience to all those he considered to be the victims of their theories. Again Pierre Magnin assures us that Francis listened patiently to their difficulties without ever getting angry and without uttering insulting words against them, despite the fact that these heretics were heated in their disputes and usually made use of insults, mockery or calumny; instead, he showed them warm love, to convince them that he was animated by no other interest than the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

In a section of his book entitled *Dell'accomodamento*, J.-P. Camus pointed out a number of features of the Salesian model which differentiated him from other missionaries in the Chablais (probably Capuchins) with their long robes and austere and rough appearance, who

described the people with terms like “uncircumcised hearts, rebels against the light, stubborn, race of vipers, corrupt members, sparks of hell, children of the devil and of darkness”. So as not to frighten the population, Francis and his collaborators had decided to “set out dressed in short cloaks and boots, convinced that in this way they would gain easier access to people’s homes and not give people an eyeful by wearing long robes that were new to them.”

Again according to Camus, he was denounced to the bishop because he called heretics “brothers”, even though they were always “errant” brothers, whom he invited to reconciliation and reunification. In the eyes of Francis, fraternity with Protestants was justified on three grounds:

They, in fact, are our brothers by virtue of baptism, which is valid in their Church; they are, moreover, our flesh and blood brothers because we and they are Adam’s offspring. Again, we are fellow-citizens and therefore subjects of the same prince; is this not capable of constituting some fraternity? In addition, I considered them as children of the Church as to their disposition, because they allow themselves to be instructed, and as my brothers in the hope of the same call to salvation; and it is precisely [by the name of brothers] that the catechumens were called in ancient times before they were baptised.

Lost brothers, rebellious brothers, but still brothers. The “loud” missionaries criticised him, then, because he “spoiled everything thinking he was doing good, because he pandered to the pride so natural to heresy, because he put those people to sleep in their error, accommodating their pillow under their elbow; when instead it was better to correct them using mercy and justice, without anointing their heads with the oil of flattery.” For his part, Francis treated people with respect, indeed with compassion, and “while others aimed to make themselves feared, he wished to make himself loved and to enter into spirits through the door of

complacency.”

Although Camus seems to force the features by opposing the two methods, it is certain that the Salesian method had its own characteristics. The tactic employed with a Calvinist such as Jean-Gaspard Deprez proves this clearly: at their first meeting, he recounts, “he approached me and asked me how the little world was going, that is, the heart, and whether I believed I could be saved in my religion and how I served God in it.” During secret talks he had in Geneva with Theodore of Beza, Calvin’s successor, he used the same method based on respect for his interlocutor and polite dialogue. The only one who got angry was Beza, who uttered “words unworthy of a philosopher”.

According to Georges Rolland, who often saw Francis at work with the Protestants, “he never pushed them […] to the point of making them indignant and feel covered with shame and confusion”; but “with his ordinary gentleness he answered them judiciously, slowly, without bitterness and contempt, and by this means he won their hearts and their goodwill”. He also adds that he was “often criticised by the Catholics who followed him to these conferences, because he treated his opponents too gently. It was said to him that he should make them ashamed of their impertinent replies; to which, he replied that to use insulting and contemptuous words would only discourage and impede these poor misguided people, whereas it was necessary to try to save them and not confuse them. And from the pulpit, speaking of them, he would say “Our gentlemen adversaries” and he would avoid the name heretic or Huguenot as much as possible.

In the long run, this method proved effective. The initial hostility of the people of the Chablais, who were familiar with the insulting terms “papist”, “magician”, “sorcerer”, “idolater” and “squint-eye”, gradually gave way to respect, admiration and friendship. Comparing this method with that of other missionaries, Camus wrote that Francis “caught more flies with a spoonful of honey so familiar to him, than all of them with their barrels of vinegar.” According to

Claude Marin, the first who dared to approach him were children; “he would give them a caress accompanied by a kind word.” A newly converted individuals tempted to go back would say “You have regained my soul.”

In search of a new form of communication

At the beginning of his mission in the Chablais, Francis de Sales soon came up against a wall. The leaders of the Protestant party had decided to ban their co-religionists from attending the sermons of the papist priest. What to do under such conditions? Since the people of Thonon did not want to go to him, he would go to them. How? The new form of communication would consist of periodically drafting and distributing leaflets, easy to read at will in their homes.

The venture began in January 1595. He drafted the first articles, copied by hand, while waiting for the services of a printing house, and distributed them little by little. He then sent a new flyer to Chambéry every week to be printed, which he then had distributed in the houses in Thonon and in the countryside. Addressing the “lords of Thonon”, Francis de Sales explained to them the whys and hows of this initiative:

Having spent some time preaching the word of God in your town, without having been heard by you except rarely, little by little and secretly, so as to leave no stone unturned on my part I began to put in writing some principal reasons, which I chose mostly in my sermons and treated previously viva voce *in defence of the faith of the Church.*

Distributed periodically in homes, the leaflets appeared as a kind of weekly magazine. What advantage did you think you would gain from this new form of communication? In addressing the “lords of Thonon”, Francis de Sales highlighted the four “conveniences” of written communication:

l. It brings information home. 2. It facilitates public debate and discussion of opinions with the adversary. 3. It is true that “words spoken with the mouth are alive,

while written on paper they are dead"; however, writing "can be handled, offers more time for reflection than the voice, and allows one to think about it more deeply". 4. Written communication is an effective means of combating misinformation because it makes the author's thoughts known precisely and makes it possible to verify whether or not a character's thoughts correspond to the doctrine he claims to defend. This made him say, "I say nothing to Thonon except what I want to be known in Annecy and Rome, should the need arise."

In fact, he considered that his first duty was to fight against the deformations of Church doctrine by Protestant authors. J.-P. Camus explains this precisely:

One of their greatest evils lies in the fact that their ministers falsify our beliefs, so that their presentation turns out to be something quite different from what it actually is: for example, that we give no importance to Holy Scripture; that we worship the Pope; that we regard the saints as gods; that we give more importance to the Blessed Virgin than to Jesus Christ; that we worship images with adoration due only to God and attribute a divine aura to them; that the souls in purgatory are in the same state and in the same despair as those in hell; that we worship the bread of the Eucharist; that we deprive the people from partaking of the blood of Jesus Christ; that we disregard the merits of Jesus Christ, attributing salvation solely to the merits of our good deeds; that auricular confession is a torment of the spirit; and similar invectives, which make our religion hateful and discredited among these people, who are thus misinformed and deceived.

Two attitudes characterise the personal procedure of Francis de Sales as a "journalist": on the one hand, the duty to inform his readers accurately, explaining to them the reasons for the Catholic position, in short, to be useful to them; on the other, a great desire to show them his affection.

Addressing his readers, he immediately declared “You will never read a piece of writing directed to you from a man as keen on your spiritual good as I am.”

Alongside written communication, he incidentally used other forms of communication, notably theatre. On the occasion of the great Catholic event in Annemasse in September 1597, which was attended by a crowd of several thousand people, a biblical drama entitled *The Sacrifice of Abraham* was performed, in which the provost impersonated God the Father. The text composed in verse was not his own work; it was, however, he who suggested the theme to his cousin, Canon de Sales, and his brother Louis, who was considered to be “exceedingly well versed in human letters”.

Truth and Charity

The author of *The Spirit of Blessed Francis de Sales* captured the heart of the Salesian message in its definitive form well, it seems, when he entitled the beginning of his work: *Of True Charity*, quoting this “precious and remarkable sentence” of his hero: “Truth that is not charitable springs from charity that is not true.”

For Francis de Sales, Camus explains, any correction must have for its purpose the good of the one to be corrected (which may cause momentary suffering) and must be done with gentleness and patience. What is more, the one who corrects must be ready to suffer injustice and ingratitude on the part of the one receiving the correction.

We can recall, regarding Francis de Sales’ experience in the Chablais, that the indispensable alliance of truth with charity is not always easy to put into practice, that there are many ways of putting it into practice, but that it is indispensable for those who are animated by a genuine concern for the correction and education of “rebellious children”.

The turning point in the life of St Francis de Sales (2/2)

(continuation from previous article)

Beginning of a new stage

From this moment on, everything would happen quickly. Francis became a new man: “At first he was perplexed, restless, melancholic” according to A. Ravier, “but now makes decisions without delay, he no longer drags out his undertakings, he throws himself into them headlong.”

Immediately, on 10 May, he put on his ecclesiastical habit. The next day, he presented himself to the vicar of the diocese. On 12 May, he took up his position in the cathedral of Annecy and visited the bishop, Bishop Claude de Granier. On 13 May, he presided at the Divine Office in the cathedral for the first time. He then settled his temporal affairs: he gave up the title of Lord of Villaroget and his rights as first-born son; he renounced the magistracy to which his father had destined him. From 18 May to 7 June, he retired with his friend and confessor, Amé Bouvard, to the Château de Sales to prepare for holy orders. For one last time he was assailed by doubts and temptations; he emerged victorious, convinced that God had manifested himself to him as “very merciful” during these spiritual exercises. He then prepared for the canonical examination for admission to orders.

Invited for the first time by the bishop to preach on the day of Pentecost, which that year fell on 6 June, he very carefully prepared his first sermon for a feast on which “not only the elderly but also the young should preach”; but the unexpected arrival of another preacher prevented him from delivering it. On 9 June, Bishop de Granier conferred the four

minor orders on him and two days later promoted him to sub-deacon.

An intense pastoral activity then began for him. On 24 June, the feast day of St John the Baptist, he preached in public for the first time with great courage, but not without first feeling a certain trembling which forced him to lie down on his bed for a few moments before climbing into the pulpit. From then on, the sermons would multiply.

A daring initiative for a sub-deacon was the foundation in Annecy of an association intended to bring together not only clergymen, but above all laymen, men and women, under the title of “Confraternity of the Penitents of the Holy Cross”. He himself drew up its statutes, which the bishop confirmed and approved. Established on 1 September 1593, it began its activities on the 14th of the same month. From the beginning, the membership was numerous and, among the first members, Francis had the joy of counting his father and, some time later, his brother Louis. The statutes provided not only for celebrations, prayers and processions, but also for visits to the sick and prisoners. At first there was some dissatisfaction especially among the religious, but it was soon realised that the testimony of the members was convincing.

Francis was ordained deacon on 18 September and a priest three months later, on 18 December 1593. After three days of spiritual preparation, he celebrated his first mass on 21 December and preached at Christmas. Some time later, he had the joy of baptising his little sister Jeanne, the last born of Mme de Boisy. His official installation in the cathedral took place at the end of December.

His “harangue” in Latin made a great impression on the bishop and the other members of the chapter, all the more profound as the topic he addressed was a burning one: recovering the ancient see of the diocese, which was Geneva. Everyone agreed: Geneva, the city of Calvin that had outlawed Catholicism, had to be regained. Yes! But how? With what weapons? And first of all, what was the cause of this

deplorable situation? The provost's answer would not have pleased everyone: "It is the examples of perverse priests, the actions, the words, in essence, the iniquity of everyone, but particularly of the clergy." Following the example of the prophets, Francis de Sales no longer analysed the political, social or ideological causes of the Protestant reform; he no longer preached war against heretics, but the conversion of all. The end of exile could only be achieved through penance and prayer, in a word, through charity:

It is by charity that we must dismantle the walls of Geneva, by charity invade it, by charity recover it. […] I propose to you neither iron, nor that dust, the smell and taste of which recall the infernal furnace […]. It is with hunger and thirst suffered by us and not by our adversaries that we must defeat the enemy.

Charles-Auguste states that, at the end of this address Francis "came down from his ambo amid the applause of the whole assembly" but one can assume that certain canons were irritated by the harangue of this young provost.

He could have contented himself with "enforcing the discipline of the canons and the exact observance of the statutes", and instead launched into ever more intense pastoral work: confessions, preaching in Annecy and in the villages, visits to the sick and prisoners. When needed, he employed his legal knowledge for the benefit of others, settled disputes and argued with the Huguenots. From January 1594 until the beginning of his mission in Chablais in September, his work as a preacher must have had a promising start. As the numerous quotations show, his sources were the Bible, the Fathers and theologians, and also pagan authors such as Aristotle, Pliny and Virgil, whose famous *Jovis omnia plena* he was not afraid to quote. His father was not used to such overwhelming zeal and such frequent preaching. "One day" Francis told his friend Jean-Pierre Camus, "he took me aside and said:

Provost, you preach too often. I even hear the bell ringing on weekdays for the sermon and they tell me: It's the provost! The provost! In my time it wasn't like that, sermons were much rarer; but what sermons! God knows, they were scholarly, well-researched; they were full of wonderful stories, a single sermon contained more quotations in Latin and Greek than ten of yours: everyone was happy and edified, people rushed to hear them; you would have heard that they went to collect manna. Now you make this practice so common that we no longer pay attention to it and no longer hold you in such esteem."

Francis was not of this opinion: for him, "to blame a worker or a vine-dresser because he cultivates his land too well was to praise him."

The beginnings of his friendship with Antoine Favre

The humanists had a taste for friendship, a favourable space for epistolary exchange in which one could express one's affection with appropriate expressions drawn from classical antiquity. Francis de Sales had certainly read Cicero's *De amicitia*. The expression with which Horace called Virgil "the half of my soul" (*Et serves animae dimidium meae*) came to mind.

Perhaps he also recalled the friendship that united Montaigne and Étienne de La Boétie: "We were in all respects each other's halves" wrote the author of the Essays, "being one soul in two bodies, according to Aristotle's felicitous definition"; "if I am asked to explain why I loved him, I find that this cannot be expressed except by answering: Because he was him and because I was me." A true friend is a treasure, says the proverb, and Francis de Sales was able to experience that it was true at the moment his life took a definitive turn, thanks to his friendship with Antoine Favre.

We possess the first letter Favre addressed to him on 30 July 1593 from Chambéry. With allusions to the "divine Plato" and in elegant and refined Latin, he expressed his desire: that, he wrote, "not only to love and honour you, but

also to contract a binding bond forever.” Favre was then thirty-five years old, had been a senator for five years, and Francis was ten years younger. They already knew each other by hearsay, and François had even attempted to make contact with him. On receiving the letter, the young provost of Sales rejoiced:

I have received, most illustrious man and upright Senator, your letter, most precious pledge of your benevolence towards me, which, also because it was not expected, has filled me with so much joy and admiration, that I cannot express my feelings.

Beyond the obvious rhetoric, aided by the use of Latin, this was the beginning of a friendship that lasted until his death. To the “provocation” of the “most illustrious and upright senator” that resembled a challenge to a duel, Francis replied with expressions suited to the case: if the friend was the first to enter the peaceful arena of friendship, it will be seen who will be the last to remain there, because I – Francis said – am “fighter who, by nature, is most ardent in this kind of struggle.” This first exchange of correspondence would give rise to a desire to meet: in fact, he writes, “that admiration arouses the desire to know, is a maxim that one learns from the very first pages of philosophy.” The letters quickly followed one another.

At the end of October 1593, Francis replied to him to thank him for procuring another friendship, that of François Girard. He had read and re-read Favre’s letters “more than ten times.” The following 30th November, Favre insisted that he accept the dignity of senator, but on this ground he would not be followed. At the beginning of December, François announced to him that his “dearest mother” had given birth to her thirteenth child. Towards the end of December, he informed him of his forthcoming ordination to the priesthood, a “distinguished honour and excellent good”, which would make him a different man, despite the feelings of fear within him.

On Christmas Eve 1593, a meeting took place in Annecy, where Favre probably attended the young provost's installation a few days later. At the beginning of 1594, a fever forced Francis to take to his bed, and his friend comforted him to such an extent that he said that your fever had become "our" fever. In March 1594, he began to call him "brother" while Favre's bride was to be "my sweetest sister" to Francis.

This friendship turned out to be fruitful and fruitful, because on 29 May 1594, Favre in turn founded the Confraternity of the Holy Cross in Chambéry; and on Whit Tuesday, the two friends organised a large common pilgrimage to Aix. In June, Favre with his wife, called "my sweetest sister, your most illustrious and beloved bride" by Francis, and their "noble children" were eagerly awaited in Annecy. Antoine Favre then had five sons and one daughter. In August, he wrote a letter to Favre's children to thank them for their writing, to encourage them to follow their father's examples and to beg them to pass on his feelings of "filial piety" to their mother. On 2 September 1594, in a hastily written note, Favre announced his next visit "as soon as possible" and ended with repeated greetings not only to his "beloved brother"', but also to "hose of Sales and all Salesians".

There were those who did not refrain from criticising these rather magniloquent letters, full of exaggerated compliments and over-cherished Latin periods. Like his correspondent, the provost of Sales, interspersing his Latin with references to the Bible and the Fathers of the Church, was especially busy quoting authors of classical antiquity. The Ciceronian model and epistolary art never escaped him, and, moreover, his friend Favre qualifies Francis' letters not only as "Ciceronian", but as "Athenian". It is not surprising that one of his own letters to Antoine Favre contains the famous quote from Terence: "Nothing human is foreign to us", an adage that has become a profession of faith among humanists.

In conclusion, Francis considered this friendship as a gift from heaven, describing it as a "fraternal

friendship that divine Goodness, the forger of nature, wove so vividly and perfectly between him and me, even though we were different in birth and vocation, and unequal in gifts and graces that I possessed only in him.” During the difficult years that were to come, Antoine Favre would always be his confidant and his best support.

A dangerous mission

In 1594, the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel I (1580-1630), had just recaptured Chablais, a region close to Geneva, south of Lake Geneva, which had long been disputed between neighbours. The political-religious history of Chablais was complicated, as shown by a letter written in rough Italian in February 1596 and addressed to the nuncio in Turin:

A part of this diocese of Geneva was occupied by the Bernese, sixty years ago, [and] remained heretical; which being reduced to the full power of His Serene Highness these past years, by the war, [and reunited with] its ancient patrimony, many of the [inhabitants,] moved rather by the rumbling of the arquebuses than by the sermons that were being preached there by order of the Bishop, were reduced to the faith in the bosom of holy mother Church. But then, those lands being infested by the incursions of the Genevans and the French, they returned to the mire.

The duke, intending to bring that population of some twenty-five thousand souls back to Catholicism, turned to the bishop to do what needed to be done. Already in 1589, he had sent fifty parish priests to regain possession of the parishes, but they were soon driven back by the Calvinists. This time it was necessary to proceed differently, namely to send two or three highly educated missionaries who were able to cope with the storm that would not fail to hit the “papists”. At an assembly of the clergy, the bishop outlined the plan and called for volunteers. No one breathed a word. When he turned his eyes towards the provost of Sales, the

latter said to him: “Bishop, if you think I am capable and if you command me, I am ready to obey and I will go willingly.”

He knew well what awaited him and that he would be received with “insults on the lips or stones in the hand.” For Francis, his father’s opposition to such a mission (detrimental to his life and even more to his family’s honour) no longer appeared to be an obstacle, because he recognised a higher will in the bishop’s order. To his father’s objections concerning the very real dangers of the mission, he replied proudly:

God, my Father, will provide: it is he who helps the strong; one only needs courage. […] And what if we were sent to India or England? Should one not go there? […] True, it is a laborious undertaking, and no one would dare deny it; but why do we wear these clothes if we shy away from carrying the burden?

He prepared himself for the mission to Sales Castle at the beginning of September 1594, in a difficult situation: “His father did not want to see him, because he was totally opposed to his son’s apostolic commitment and had hindered him with all imaginable efforts, without having been able to undermine his generous decision. On the last evening, he said goodbye in secret to his virtuous mother.”

On 14 September 1594, he arrived in Chablais in the company of his cousin Louis de Sales. Four days later his father sent a servant to tell him to return, “but the saintly young man [in reply] sent back his valet Georges Rolland and his own horse, and persuaded his cousin to return as well to reassure the family. The cousin obeyed him, though he later returned to see him. And our saint recounted […] that in all his life he had never felt such great interior consolation, nor so much courage in the service of God and souls, as on that 18th September 1594, when he found himself without companion, without valet, without crew, and forced to wander hither and thither, alone, poor and on foot, engaged in

preaching the Kingdom of God."

To dissuade him from such a risky mission, his father cut him off. According to Pierre Magnin, "Francis's father, as I learned from the lips of the holy man, did not want to assist him with the abundance that would have been necessary, wishing to divert him from such an undertaking initiated by his son against his advice, well aware of the obvious danger to which he was exposing his life. And once he let him leave Sales to return to Thonon with only a shield, so that [Francis] was forced […] to make the journey on foot, often ill-fitting and ill-clad, exposed to a severe cold, wind, rain and snow unbearable in this country."

After an assault he suffered with Georges Rolland, the Lord of Boisy tried again to dissuade him from the venture, but again without success. Francis tried to rattle the strings of his fatherly pride by commendably writing him these lines:

If Rolland were your son, while he is but your valet, he would not have had so little courage as to back down for such a modest fight as the one that has befallen him, and he would not speak of it as a great battle. No one can doubt the ill-will of our adversaries; but you do us a wrong when you doubt our courage. […] I beseech you therefore, my Father, not to attribute my perseverance to disobedience and to always consider me as your most respectful son.

An enlightening remark handed down to us by Albert de Genève helps us better understand what eventually convinced the father to cease opposing his son. The grandfather of this witness at the process of beatification, a friend of Monsieur de Boisy, had told Francis' father one day that he must feel "very fortunate to have a son so dear to God, and that he considered him too wise and God-fearing to oppose [his son's] holy will, which was aimed at realising a plan in which the holy name of God would be greatly glorified, the Church exalted and the House of Sales would receive greater glory

than all other titles, however illustrious they might be.”

The time of responsibilities

Provost of the cathedral in 1593 at the age of only twenty-five, head of the mission in the Chablais the following year, Francis de Sales could count on an exceptionally rich and harmonious education: a well-groomed family upbringing, a high quality moral and religious formation, and high-level literary, philosophical, theological, scientific and legal studies. True, he had benefited from possibilities forbidden to most of his contemporaries, but beyond the ordinary in him were personal effort, generous response to the appeals he received and the tenacity he showed in pursuing his vocation, not to mention the marked spirituality that inspired his behaviour.

By now he was to become a public man, with increasingly broader responsibilities, enabling him to put his gifts of nature and grace to good use for others. Already in line to become coadjutor bishop of Geneva as early as 1596, appointed bishop in 1599, he became Bishop of Geneva upon the death of his predecessor in 1602. A man of the Church above all, but very much immersed in the life of society, we will see him concerned not only with the administration of the diocese, but also with the formation of the people entrusted to his pastoral ministry.

The turning point in the life of St Francis de Sales (1/2)

After ten years of study in Paris and three years

at the University of Padua, Francis de Sales returned to Savoy shortly before the beginning of spring 1592. He confided to his cousin Louis that he was “more and more determined to embrace the ecclesiastical state, despite the resistance of his parents”. Nevertheless, he agreed to go to Chambéry to enrol in the bar of the Senate of Savoy.

In truth, the entire direction of his life was at stake. On the one hand, in fact, there was his father’s authority commanding him, as Francis was the eldest son, to consider a career in the world; on the other, there were his inclinations and the growing awareness that he had to follow a particular vocation “to be of the Church”. If it is true that “fathers do everything for the good of their children”, it is equally true that the views of one and the other do not always coincide. His father, Monsieur de Boisy, dreamed of a magnificent career for Francis: senator of the Duchy and (why not?) president of the sovereign Senate of Savoy. Francis de Sales would one day write that fathers “are never satisfied and never know how to stop talking to their children about the means that can make them greater”

Now, for him obedience was a fundamental imperative and what he would later tell Philothea was a rule of life that he certainly followed from childhood: “You must humbly obey your ecclesiastical superiors, such as the pope and the bishop, the parish priest and their representatives; you must then obey your political superiors, that is, your prince and the magistrates he instituted in your country; you must finally obey the superiors of your house, that is, your father, your mother.” The problem arose from the impossibility of reconciling the different obediences. Between his father’s will and his own (which he increasingly perceived to be God’s) the opposition became inevitable. Let us follow the stages of the vocational maturation of a “sweet rebel”

Retrospective look

To understand the drama experienced by Francis it is necessary to revisit the past, because this drama marked

his entire youth and was resolved in 1593. From the age of about ten, Francis cultivated his own life project within himself. More than a few events he experienced or provoked bear witness to this. At the age of eleven, before leaving for Paris, he had asked his father for permission to receive the tonsure. This ceremony, during which the bishop placed the candidate on the first step of an ecclesiastical career, actually took place on 20 September 1578 Clermont-en-Genevois. His father, who at first opposed it, eventually gave in because he considered it to be nothing more than a childish whim. During the preliminary examination, amazed at the accuracy of the answers and the candidate's modesty, the bishop allegedly told him "My boy, cheer up, you will be a good servant of God". At the moment of sacrificing his blond hair, Francis confessed that he felt a certain regret. However, the commitment he made would always remain fixed in his memory. Indeed, he confided one day to Mother Angélique Arnauld: "From twelve years on, I have been so determined to be of the Church that I would not have changed my intention, not even for a kingdom."

When his father, who was not unsympathetic, decided to send him to Paris to complete his studies there, he must have felt contradictory feelings in his soul, described in the *Treatise on the Love of God*: "A father sending his son either to court or to his studies," he wrote, "does not deny tears to his departure, testifying, that though according to his superior part, for the child's advancement in virtue, he wills his departure, yet according to his inferior part he has a repugnance to the separation." Let us also recall the choice of the Jesuit college in Paris, preferred to the one at Navarre, Francis' behaviour while growing up, the influence of Father Possevino's spiritual direction in Padua and all the other factors that could have played in favour of the consolidation of his ecclesiastical vocation.

But before him stood a rocky obstacle: his father's will, to which he owed not only humble submission according to the custom of the time, but also something more

and better, because “the love and respect that a son bears his father make him decide not only to live according to his commands, but also according to the desires and preferences he expresses”. In Paris, towards the end of his stay, he was deeply impressed by the decision of the Duke of Joyeuse, an old favourite of Henry III, who had become a Capuchin following the death of his wife. According to his friend Jean Pasquelet, “If he had not been afraid of upsetting the soul of Monsieur de Boisy, his father, being his eldest son, he would have become a Capuchin without fail.”

He studied out of obedience, but also to make himself useful to his neighbour. “And it is still true, Father de Quoex testified, “what he told me while he was in Paris and Padua, that he was interested not so much in what he was studying, but rather in thinking whether one day he would be able to serve God worthily and help his neighbour through the studies he was doing.” In 1620 he confided to François de Ronis: “While I was in Padua, I studied law to please my father, and to please myself I studied theology.” Similarly, François Bochut declared that “when he was sent to Padua to study law to please his parents, his inclination led him to embrace the ecclesiastical state”, and that there he “completed most of his theological studies, devoting most of his time to them”. This last statement seems clearly exaggerated: Francis de Sales certainly had to devote the greater part of his time and energy to the juridical studies that were part of his “duty of state”. As for his father, Jean-Pierre Camus relates this significant confidence: “I had the best father in the world” he told me; “but he was a good man who had spent most of his years at court and at war, so he knew those principles better than those of theology.”

It was probably Father Possevino who became his best support in guiding his life. According to his nephew Charles-Auguste, Possevino told him: “Continue to think about divine things and to study theology”, adding gently: “Believe me, your spirit is not suited to the labours of the forum and your eyes are not made to endure its dust; the road of the

century is too slippery, there is a danger of getting lost. Is there not more glory in proclaiming the word of our good Lord to thousands of human beings, from the cathedrals of the churches, than in warming one's hands by beating one's fists on the benches of the prosecutors to settle disputes?" It was undoubtedly his attraction to this ideal that enabled him to resist certain manoeuvres and distasteful farces by some comrades who were certainly not models of virtue.

A very difficult discernment and choice

On his return journey from Padua, Francis de Sales carried with him a letter from his old professor Panciroli addressed to his father, advising him to send his son to the Senate. Monsieur de Boisy wanted nothing more, and to this end had prepared a rich library of law for Francis, provided him with land and a title, and destined him to be the Lord of Villaroget. Finally, he asked him to meet Françoise Suchet, a fourteen-year-old girl, "an only child and very beautiful", Charles-Auguste pointed out, to make "preliminary marriage arrangements". Francis was twenty-five, an age of majority in the mentality of the time and suitable for marriage. His choice had been made a long time ago, but he did not want to create any ruptures, preferring to prepare his father for the favourable moment.

He met the young lady several times, making it clear, however, that he had other intentions. "To please his father", François Favre declared at the beatification process, "he visited the young lady, whose virtues he admired", but "he could not be convinced to accept such a marriage, despite all his father's efforts in this regard." Francis also revealed to Amé Bouvard, his confidant: "In obedience to my father, I saw the young lady to whom he wholeheartedly intended me, I admired her virtue"", adding, bluntly and with conviction: "Believe me, I tell you the truth: my only wish has always been to embrace the ecclesiastical life." Claude de Blonay claimed to have heard from Francis' own lips "that he had refused such a beautiful covenant, not out of contempt for

marriage, of which he had great respect as a sacrament, but rather out of a certain ardour, intimate and spiritual, that inclined him to place himself totally at the service of the Church and to be all of God, with an undivided heart."

Meanwhile, on 24 November 1592, during a session in which he gave praiseworthy proof of his abilities, he had been accepted as a lawyer at the Bar in Chambéry. On his return from Chambéry, he saw a celestial sign in an incident reported by Michel Favre: "The horse collapsed under him and the sword from its scabbard came to rest on the ground with the point pointing at him, [so] from this he drew further convincing proof that God wanted him in his service, together with the hope that He would provide him with the means." According to Charles-Auguste, the sword "out of its sheath had traced a kind of cross". What seems certain is that the prospect of a profession as a lawyer should not have excited him, if one lends credence to what he would later write:

[According to some,] when the chameleon swells, it changes colour; this happens out of fear and apprehension, say others. Democritus states that the tongue torn out while they were alive made those who had it in their mouths win trials; this applies well to the tongues of lawyers, who are true chameleons.

A few weeks later, he was given a senator's licence from Turin. It was an extraordinary honour for his age, because if "lawyers argue in the bar with many words about the facts and rights of the parties", "the Parliament or Senate resolves all difficulties with a decree from above." Francis did not want to accept such a high office, which could upset all the facts of the matter again. Despite the scandalised astonishment of his father and pressure from his best friends, he strictly maintained his refusal. And even when it was shown to him that the accumulation of civil and ecclesiastical offices was permissible, he replied that "one should not mix sacred and profane things".

The day finally came when, by a happy combination of circumstances, he was able to unravel a complicated situation that could have degenerated into a painful break with his family. A few months later, and precisely after the death of the provost of the cathedral in October 1592, some confidants had unbeknownst to him submitted an application to Rome for him to take this position, which made him the first person in the diocese after the bishop. On 7 May 1593, the Roman appointment arrived. Two days later, the meeting that was to mark the turning point of his life took place. With the support of his mother, Francis made a request to his old father that he had never dared to make: “Have the courtesy, my father, […] to allow me to be of the Church.”

It was a terrible blow for Monsieur de Boisy, who suddenly saw his plans crumble. He was “shocked” because he had not expected such a request. Charles-Auguste adds that “his lady was no less so”, having been present at the scene. For the father, his son’s desire to be a priest was a “mood” that someone had put in his head or “advised” him.

“I hoped” he told him, “that you would be the rod of my old age, and instead you turn away from me before your time. Be careful what you do. Perhaps you still need to mature in your decision. Your head is made for a more majestic beret. You have devoted so many years to the study of the law: jurisprudence will do you no good under a priest’s cassock. You have brothers whom you must be a father to when they are missing.”

For Francis it was an inner need, a “vocation” that engaged his whole person and his whole life. His father had respect for the priesthood, but he still considered it a simple function, a profession. Now the Catholic reform aimed to give the priesthood a renewed, higher and more demanding configuration, that is, to consider it a call from God sanctioned by the Church. The duty to respond to this divine call perhaps also corresponded to a new right of the human

person, which Francis defended in the face of his father's "unilateral" decision. The latter, after setting out all his good reasons against such a project, knowing that his son would occupy a very honourable position, ended up giving in: "For God's sake, do what you believe."

In a work that appeared in 1669, Nicolas de Hauteville commented on this episode, comparing Monsieur de Boisy's drama to that of Abraham, whom God had commanded to sacrifice his son. But with this difference, that it was Francis who had imposed the sacrifice on his father. In fact, wrote the ancient chronicler, "the whole of [Francis'] adolescence and youth was a time of joy, hope and consolation that was very gratifying for his good father, but in the end it must be confessed that this [new] Isaac was for him a boy cause of worries, bitterness and pain." And he added that "the struggle that was unleashed within him made him seriously ill, finding it hard to allow this beloved son to marry a breviary instead of a handsome and wealthy young lady heiress of a very noble and ancient house of Savoy."

(continued)

St Francis de Sales university student in Padua (2/2)

(continuation from previous article)

Francis went to Padua, a city belonging to the Venetian Republic, in October 1588, accompanied by his younger brother Gallois, a twelve-year-old boy who would study with the Jesuits, and their faithful tutor, Fr Déage. At the end of

the 16th century, the law faculty of the University of Padua enjoyed an extraordinary reputation, surpassing even that of the famous Studium in Bologna. When he delivered his Discourse of Thanksgiving following his promotion to doctor, Francis de Sales weaved its praises in dithyrambic form:

Up to that time, I had not dedicated any work to the holy and sacred science of law: but when, afterwards, I decided to commit myself to such a study, I had absolutely no need to look for where to turn or where to go; this college of Padua immediately attracted me by its celebrity and, under the most favourable auspices, in fact, at that time, it had doctors and readers such as it never had and never will have greater.

Whatever he may say, it is certain that the decision to study law did not come from him, but was imposed on him by his father. Other reasons might have played in Padua's favour, namely the need that the Senate of a bilingual state had for magistrates with a dual French and Italian culture.

In the homeland of humanism

Crossing the Alps for the first time, Francis de Sales set foot in the homeland of humanism. In Padua, he could not only admire the palaces and churches, especially the basilica of St Anthony, but also Giotto's frescoes, Donatello's bronzes, Mantegna's paintings and Titian's frescoes. His stay in the Italian peninsula also allowed him to get to know several cities of art, in particular, Venice, Milan and Turin.

On a literary level, he could not fail to be in contact with some of the most famous productions. Did he have in his hand Dante Alighieris *Divine Comedy*, the poems of Petrarch, forerunner of humanism and first poet of his time, the novellas of Boccaccio, founder of Italian prose, Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, or Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*? His preference was for spiritual literature, in particular the thoughtful reading of Lorenzo Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat*. He

acknowledged modestly, “I don’t think I speak perfect Italian.”

In Padua, Francis had the good fortune to meet a distinguished Jesuit in the person of Father Antonio Possevino. This “wandering humanist with an epic life” who had been charged by the pope with diplomatic missions in Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Poland and France, had taken up permanent residence in Padua shortly before Francis’ arrival. He became his spiritual director and guide in his studies and knowledge of the world.

The University of Padua

Founded in 1222, the University of Padua was the oldest university in Italy after Bologna, of which it was an offshoot. It successfully taught not only law, regarded as the *scientia scientiarum*, but also theology, philosophy and medicine. The 1,500 or so students came from all over Europe and were not all Catholics, which sometimes led to worries and unrest.

Fights were frequent, sometimes bloody. One of the favourite dangerous games was the “Paduan hunt” Francis de Sales would one day tell a friend, Jean-Pierre Camus, “that a student, after striking a stranger,ì with his sword, took refuge with a woman he discovered was the mother of the young man he had just murdered.” He himself, who did not go round without a sword, was one day involved in a fight by fellow students, who considered his gentleness to be a form of cowardice.

Professors and students alike appreciated the proverbial *patavinam libertatem*, which in addition to being cultivated in intellectual pursuit, also incited a good number of students to “flutter about” by giving themselves up to the good life. Even the disciples closest to Francis were not models of virtue. The widow of one of them would later recount, in her picturesque language, how her future husband had staged a farce in bad taste with some accomplices, aimed at throwing Francis into the arms of a “miserable whore”.

The study of law

In obedience to his father, Francis devoted himself courageously to the study of civil law, to which he wanted to add that of ecclesiastical law, which would make him a future doctor of *utroque jure*. The study of law also involved the study of jurisprudence, which is "the science by means of which law is administered".

The study focused on the sources of law, that is, ancient Roman law, collected and interpreted in the 6th century by the jurists of the Emperor Justinian. Throughout his life, he would remember the definition of justice, read at the beginning of the *Digesto*: "a perpetual, strong and constant will to render to everyone what belongs to him."

Examining Francis' notebooks, we can identify some of his reactions to certain laws. He is in full agreement with the title of the Code that opens the series of laws: *Of the Sovereign Trinity and the Catholic Faith*, and with the defence that immediately follows: T*hat no one should be allowed to discuss them in public*. "This title" he noted, "is precious, I would say sublime, and worthy of being read often against reformers, know-it-alls and politicians."

Francis de Sales' legal education rested on a foundation that seemed unquestionable at the time. For the Catholics of his time, "tolerating" Protestantism could take on no other meaning than that of being accomplices to error; hence the need to fight it by all means, including those provided by the law in force. Under no circumstances was one to resign oneself to the presence of heresy, which appeared not only as an error on the level of faith, but also as a source of division and disturbance in Christianity. In the eagerness of his twenties, Francis de Sales shared this view.

But this eagerness also had free rein over those who favoured injustice and persecution, since, with regard to Title XXVI of Book III, he wrote: "As precious as gold and worthy of being written in capital letters is the ninth law which states: 'Let the relatives of the prince be punished with fire if they persecute the inhabitants of the

provinces.’”

Later, Francis would appeal to the one he designated as “our Justinian”to denounce the slowness of justice on the part of the judge who “excuses himself by invoking a thousand reasons of custom, style, theory, practice and caution.” In his lectures on ecclesiastical law, he studied the collection of laws that he would later use, in particular those of the medieval canonist Gratianus, inter alia, to demonstrate that the bishop of Rome is the “true successor of Saint Peter and head of the Church militant”, and that religious men and women must be placed “under the obedience of the bishops.”

Consulting the handwritten notes taken by Francis during his stay in Padua, one is struck by the extremely neat handwriting. He went from the Gothic script, still used in Paris, to the modern script of the humanists.

But in the end, his law studies must have bored him quite a bit. On a hot summer’s day, faced with the coldness of the laws and their remoteness in time, he wrote, disillusioned: “Since these matters are old, it did not seem profitable to devote oneself to examining them in this steamy weather, which is too hot to comfortably deal with cold and chilling discussions.”

Theological studies and intellectual crisis

While dedicated to the study of law, Francis continued to take a close interest in theology. According to his nephew, when he freshly arrived in Padua, “he set to work with all possible diligence, and placed on the lectern in his room the Summa of the Angelic Doctor, St Thomas, so that he could have it before his eyes every day and easily consult it to understand other books. He greatly enjoyed reading the books of St Bonaventure. He acquired a good knowledge of the Latin Fathers, especially the ‘two brilliant luminaries of the Church’, ‘the great Saint Augustine’ and Saint Jerome, who were also ‘two great captains of the ancient Church’, without forgetting the ‘glorious Saint Ambrose’ and Saint Gregory the

Great. Among the Greek Fathers, he admired St John Chrysostom 'who, because of his sublime eloquence, was praised and called Golden Mouth'. He also frequently cited St Gregory of Nazianzus, St Basil, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Athanasius, Origen and others."

Consulting the fragments of notes that have come down to us, we learn that he also read the most important authors of his time, in particular, the great Spanish exegete and theologian Juan Maldonado, a Jesuit who had successfully established new methods in the study of the texts of Scripture and the Church Fathers. In addition to personal study, Francis was able to take theology courses at the university, where Fr Déage was preparing his doctorate, and benefit from the help and advice of Fr Possevino. It is also known that he often visited the Franciscans at the Basilica of St Anthony.

His reflection focused again on the problem of predestination and grace, to the point that he filled five notebooks. In reality, Francis found himself faced with a dilemma: to remain faithful to convictions that had always been his, or to stick to the classical positions of St Augustine and St Thomas, "the greatest and unrivalled doctor." Now he found it difficult to "sympathise"with such a discouraging doctrine of these two masters, or at least with the current interpretation, according to which men have no right to salvation,because it depends entirely on a free decision by God.

By his adolescence, Francis had developed a more optimistic view of God's plan. His personal convictions were reinforced after the appearance in 1588 of the book by Spanish Jesuit Luis Molina, whose Latin title *Concordia* summed up the thesis well: *Concord of Free Will with the Gift of Grace*. In this work, predestination in the strict sense was replaced with a predestination that took into account man's merits, i.e. his good or bad deeds. In other words, Molina affirmed both God's sovereign action and the decisive role of the freedom he bestowed on man.

In 1606, the bishop of Geneva would have the

honour of being consulted by the pope on the theological dispute between the Jesuit Molina and the Dominican Domingo Báñez on the same issue, for whom Molina's doctrine granted too much autonomy to human freedom, at the risk of jeopardising God's sovereignty.

The *Treatise on the Love of God*, which appeared in 1616, contains in Chapter 5 of Book III the thought of Francis de Sales, summarised in "fourteen lines", which, according to Jean-Pierre Camus, had cost him "the reading of one thousand two hundred pages of a large volume." With a commendable effort to be concise and exact, Francis affirmed both the divine liberality and generosity, and human freedom and responsibility in the act of writing this weighty sentence: "It is up to us to be his: for although it is a gift of God to belong to God, yet it is a gift that God never refuses to anyone, on the contrary, he offers it to all, to grant it to those who will willingly consent to receive it."

Making his own the ideas of the Jesuits, who in the eyes of many appeared to be innovators, and whom the Jansenists with Blaise Pascal would soon brand as bad theologians, too lax, Francis de Sales grafted his theology into the current of Christian humanism and opted for the "God of the human heart" Salesian theology, which rests on the goodness of God who wants all to be saved, would likewise present itself with a pressing invitation to the human person to respond with the whole "heart" to the appeals of grace.

Medicine

Alongside the faculties of law and theology, the studies of medicine and botany enjoyed extraordinary prestige in Padua, especially after the Flemish physician Andrea Vesalius, the father of modern anatomy, had dealt a mortal blow to the old theories of Hippocrates and Galienus with the practice of dissecting the human body, which scandalised the established authorities. Vesalius had published his *De humani corporis fabrica* in 1543, which revolutionised knowledge of human anatomy. To procure corpses, the bodies of the executed

were demanded or the dead were dug up, which did not happen without provoking sometimes bloody disputes with gravediggers.

Nevertheless, several things can be said. First of all, it is known that during the serious illness that laid him low in Padua at the end of 1590, he had decided to donate his own body to science if he died, and this was to avoid quarrels among medical students intent on searching for corpses. Did he therefore approve of the new method of dissecting the human body? In any case, he seemed to encourage it with this hotly debated gesture. Moreover, one can detect in him an abiding interest in health problems, in doctors and surgeons. There is a big difference, he wrote for example, between the brigand and the surgeon: 'The brigand and the surgeon cut the limbs and make the blood flow, one to kill, the other to heal."

Also in Padua at the beginning of the 17th century, an English doctor, William Harvey, discovered the rules of blood circulation. The heart truly became the author of life, the centre of everything, the sun, like the prince in his state. Although the English physician would only publish his findings in 1628, it is possible to assume that by the time Francis was a student, such research was already underway. He himself wrote, for example, that "*cor habet motum in se proprium et alia movere facit*", i.e. that "the heart has within it a movement which is proper to it and which makes everything else move." Quoting Aristotle, he would say that "the heart is the first member that comes to life in us and the last that dies."

Botany

Probably during his stay in Padua, Francis also became interested in the natural sciences. He could not be unaware that there was the first botanical garden in the city, created to cultivate, observe and experiment with indigenous and exotic plants. Plants were ingredients in most medicines and their use for therapeutic purposes was mainly based on texts by ancient authors, which were not always reliable. We possess eight collections of *Similitudes* by Francis, probably

compiled between 1594 and 1614, but whose origin can be traced back to Padua. The title of these small collections of images and comparisons drawn from nature certainly manifests their utilitarian character; their content, on the other hand, testifies to an almost encyclopaedic interest, not only in the plant world, but also in the mineral and animal worlds.

Francis de Sales consulted the ancient authors, who in his time enjoyed an undisputed authority on the subject: Pliny the Elder, author of a vast *Natural History*, a true encyclopaedia of the time, but also Aristotle (that of the *History of Animals* and *The Generation of Animals*), Plutarch, Theophrastus (author of a *History of Plants*), and even St Augustine and St Albert the Great. He was also familiar with contemporary authors, in particular the *Commentari a Dioscorides* by the Italian naturalist Pietro Andrea Mattioli.

What fascinated Francis de Sales was the mysterious relationship between natural history and man's spiritual life. For him, writes A. Ravier, "every discovery is the bearer of a secret of creation." The particular virtues of certain plants are marvellous: "Pliny and Mattioli describe a herb that is salutary against plague, colic, kidney stones, inviting us to cultivate it in our gardens." Along the many paths he travelled during his life, we see him attentive to nature, to the world around him, to the succession of the seasons and their mysterious significance. The book of nature appeared to him as an immense Bible that he had to learn to interpret, which is why he called the Fathers of the Church "spiritual herbalists". When he exercised the spiritual direction of very different people, he would remember that "in the garden, every herb and every flower requires special care."

Personal life programme

During his stay in Padua, a city where there were more than forty monasteries and convents, Francis again turned to the Jesuits for his spiritual direction. Stressing as is

appropriate the leading role of the Jesuits in the formation of the young Francis de Sales, it must be said, however, that they were not the only ones. A great admiration and friendship bound him to Father Filippo Gesualdi, a Franciscan preacher from the famous convent of St Anthony of Padua. He frequented the Theatine convent, where Father Lorenzo Scupoli came from time to time to preach. There he discovered the book entitled *Spiritual Combat*, which taught him how to master the inclinations of the lower part of the soul. Francis de Sales "wrote not a few things" Camus said, "of which I immediately discover the seed and the germ in some passages of the *Combat'"* During his stay in Padua, he also seems to have dedicated himself to an educational activity in an orphanage.

It is undoubtedly due to the beneficial influence of these teachers, in particular Father Possevino, that Francis wrote various rules of life, of which significant fragments have survived. The first, entitled *Exercise of Preparation*, was a mental exercise to be performed in the morning: "I will endeavour, through it" he wrote, "to prepare myself to deal with and perform my duty in the most praiseworthy manner." It consisted in imagining everything that could happen to him during the day:"I will therefore think seriously about the unforeseen events that may happen to me, the groups where I may be forced to intervene, the events that may occur to me, the places where people will try to persuade me to go."And here is the purpose of the exercise:

I will study diligently and seek the best ways to avoid missteps. I shall thus dispose and determine within myself what it shall be expedient for me to do, the order and behaviour I shall have to remain in this or some other circumstance, what it will be appropriate to say in company, the demeanour I shall have to observe and what I shall have to flee and desire.

In his *Particular Conduct to spend the day well*, the student identified the main practices of piety he intended

to do: morning prayers, daily Mass, time of "spiritual rest", prayers and invocations during the night. In the *Exercise of Sleep or Spiritual Rest*, he would specify the subjects on which he was to focus his meditations. Alongside the classical themes, such as the vanity of this world, the detestation of sin, divine justice, he had carved out space for considerations, with a humanist flavour, on the "excellence of virtue", which "makes man beautiful inwardly and also outwardly", on the beauty of human reason, this "divine torch" that spreads a "marvellous splendour", as well as on the "infinite wisdom, omnipotence and incomprehensible goodness" of God. Another practice of piety was devoted to frequent Communion, its preparation and thanksgiving. There is a development in his frequency of Communion compared to the Parisian period.

As for the *Rules for Conversations and Meetings*, they are of particular interest from the point of view of social education. They contain six points that the student set out to observe. First of all, a clear distinction had to be made between simple encounters, where "companionship is momentary" and "conversation" where affectivity comes into play. As far as encounters are concerned, one reads this general rule:

I will never despise or give the impression of completely shunning meeting any individual; this could give reason to appear haughty, severe, arrogant, censorious, ambitious and controlling. […] I will not take the liberty of saying or doing anything that is not balanced, lest I appear insolent, letting myself be carried away by too easy a familiarity. Above all, I will be careful not to bite or sting or mock anyone […]. I will respect everyone in particular, I will observe modesty, I will speak little and well, so that the companions will return to a new meeting with pleasure and not with boredom.

With regard to conversations, a term that at the

time had a broad meaning of habitual acquaintance or companionship, Francis was more cautious. He wanted to be “a friend to all and familiar to few”, and always faithful to the one rule that allowed no exception: “Nothing against God”.

For the rest, he wrote, “I will be modest without insolence, free without austerity, gentle without affectation, yielding without contradiction unless reason suggests otherwise, cordial without dissimulation.” He would behave differently towards superiors, equals and inferiors. It was his general rule to “adapt himself to the variety of company, but without prejudice to virtue in any way.” He divided people into three categories: the brash, the free and the closed. He would remain imperturbable before insolent people, would be open with free (i.e. simple, welcoming) people and would be very prudent with melancholic types, often full of curiosity and suspicion. With adults, finally, he would be on his guard, to deal with them “as with fire” and not get too close. Of course, one could testify to them about love, because love “begets freedom” but what must dominate is respect that “begets modesty”.

It is easy to see what degree of human and spiritual maturity the law student had reached by then. Prudence, wisdom, modesty, discernment and charity are the qualities that leap to the eye in his life programme, but there is also an “honest freedom”, a benevolent attitude towards all, and an uncommon spiritual fervour. This did not prevent him from going through difficult times in Padua, of which there are perhaps reminiscences in a passage of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* where he states that “a young man or a young lady who does not go along in speech, in play, in dancing, in drinking or in dressing with the unruliness of a debauched company will be mocked and taunted by others, and their modesty called bigotry or affectation.”

Return to Savoy

On 5 September 1591, Francis de Sales crowned all his studies with a brilliant doctorate *in utroque jure*. Taking

leave of the University of Padua, he departed, he said, from “that hill on whose summit dwell, without doubt, the Muses as in another Parnassus.”

Before leaving Italy, it was appropriate to visit this country so rich in history, culture and religion. With Déage, Gallois and a few Savoyard friends, they left at the end of October for Venice, then on to Ancona and the sanctuary at Loreto. Their final destination was to reach Rome. Unfortunately, the presence of brigands, emboldened by the death of Pope Gregory XIV, and also the lack of money did not allow them to do so.

On his return to Padua, he resumed his study of the *Codex* for some time, including the account of the journey. But at the end of 1591, he gave up because of fatigue. It was time to think about returning to his homeland. Indeed, the return to Savoy took place towards the end of February 1592.

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But this eagerness also had free rein over those who favoured injustice and persecution, since, with regard to Title XXVI of Book III, he wrote: “As precious as gold and worthy of being written in capital letters is the ninth law which states: ‘Let the relatives of the prince be punished with fire if they persecute the inhabitants of the provinces.’”

Later, Francis would appeal to the one he designated as “our Justinian”to denounce the slowness of justice on the part of the judge who “excuses himself by

invoking a thousand reasons of custom, style, theory, practice and caution.” In his lectures on ecclesiastical law, he studied the collection of laws that he would later use, in particular those of the medieval canonist Gratianus, inter alia, to demonstrate that the bishop of Rome is the “true successor of Saint Peter and head of the Church militant”, and that religious men and women must be placed “under the obedience of the bishops.”

Consulting the handwritten notes taken by Francis during his stay in Padua, one is struck by the extremely neat handwriting. He went from the Gothic script, still used in Paris, to the modern script of the humanists.

But in the end, his law studies must have bored him quite a bit. On a hot summer’s day, faced with the coldness of the laws and their remoteness in time, he wrote, disillusioned: “Since these matters are old, it did not seem profitable to devote oneself to examining them in this steamy weather, which is too hot to comfortably deal with cold and chilling discussions.”

Theological studies and intellectual crisis

While dedicated to the study of law, Francis continued to take a close interest in theology. According to his nephew, when he freshly arrived in Padua, “he set to work with all possible diligence, and placed on the lectern in his room the Summa of the Angelic Doctor, St Thomas, so that he could have it before his eyes every day and easily consult it to understand other books. He greatly enjoyed reading the books of St Bonaventure. He acquired a good knowledge of the Latin Fathers, especially the ‘two brilliant luminaries of the Church’, ‘the great Saint Augustine’ and Saint Jerome, who were also ‘two great captains of the ancient Church’, without forgetting the ‘glorious Saint Ambrose’ and Saint Gregory the Great. Among the Greek Fathers, he admired St John Chrysostom ‘who, because of his sublime eloquence, was praised and called Golden Mouth’. He also frequently cited St Gregory of Nazianzus, St Basil, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Athanasius,

Origen and others."

Consulting the fragments of notes that have come down to us, we learn that he also read the most important authors of his time, in particular, the great Spanish exegete and theologian Juan Maldonado, a Jesuit who had successfully established new methods in the study of the texts of Scripture and the Church Fathers. In addition to personal study, Francis was able to take theology courses at the university, where Fr Déage was preparing his doctorate, and benefit from the help and advice of Fr Possevino. It is also known that he often visited the Franciscans at the Basilica of St Anthony.

His reflection focused again on the problem of predestination and grace, to the point that he filled five notebooks. In reality, Francis found himself faced with a dilemma: to remain faithful to convictions that had always been his, or to stick to the classical positions of St Augustine and St Thomas, "the greatest and unrivalled doctor." Now he found it difficult to "sympathise"with such a discouraging doctrine of these two masters, or at least with the current interpretation, according to which men have no right to salvation,because it depends entirely on a free decision by God.

By his adolescence, Francis had developed a more optimistic view of God's plan. His personal convictions were reinforced after the appearance in 1588 of the book by Spanish Jesuit Luis Molina, whose Latin title *Concordia* summed up the thesis well: *Concord of Free Will with the Gift of Grace*. In this work, predestination in the strict sense was replaced with a predestination that took into account man's merits, i.e. his good or bad deeds. In other words, Molina affirmed both God's sovereign action and the decisive role of the freedom he bestowed on man.

In 1606, the bishop of Geneva would have the honour of being consulted by the pope on the theological dispute between the Jesuit Molina and the Dominican Domingo Báñez on the same issue, for whom Molina's doctrine granted too much autonomy to human freedom, at the risk of

jeopardising God's sovereignty.

The *Treatise on the Love of God*, which appeared in 1616, contains in Chapter 5 of Book III the thought of Francis de Sales, summarised in "fourteen lines", which, according to Jean-Pierre Camus, had cost him "the reading of one thousand two hundred pages of a large volume." With a commendable effort to be concise and exact, Francis affirmed both the divine liberality and generosity, and human freedom and responsibility in the act of writing this weighty sentence: "It is up to us to be his: for although it is a gift of God to belong to God, yet it is a gift that God never refuses to anyone, on the contrary, he offers it to all, to grant it to those who will willingly consent to receive it."

Making his own the ideas of the Jesuits, who in the eyes of many appeared to be innovators, and whom the Jansenists with Blaise Pascal would soon brand as bad theologians, too lax, Francis de Sales grafted his theology into the current of Christian humanism and opted for the "God of the human heart" Salesian theology, which rests on the goodness of God who wants all to be saved, would likewise present itself with a pressing invitation to the human person to respond with the whole "heart" to the appeals of grace.

(continued)

St Francis de Sales as a young student in Paris

In 1578 Francis de Sales was 11 years old. His father, wishing to make his eldest son a prominent figure in Savoy, sent him to Paris to continue his studies in the intellectual capital of the time. The boarding school he

wanted him to attend was the college of nobles, but Francis preferred the Jesuit one. With the help of his mother, he won his case and became a student of the Jesuits at their college in Clermont.

Recalling his studies in Paris one day, Francis de Sales was full of praise: Savoy had granted him "his beginnings in the fine arts", he would write, but it was at the University of Paris, "very flourishing and much frequented", where he had "applied himself in earnest first to the fine arts, then to all areas of philosophy, with an ease and profit favoured by the fact that even the roofs, so to speak, and the walls seem to philosophise."

In a page of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales recounts a recollection of Paris at that time, in which he reconstructs the climate in which the capital's student youth was immersed, torn between forbidden pleasures, fashionable heresy and monastic devotion:

When I was a young man in Paris, two students, one of whom was a heretic, were spending the night in the suburb of Saint-Jacques, having a debauched night out, when they heard the morning bell ringing in the Carthusian church. The heretic asked his Catholic companion why he rang the bell, and the latter told him how devoutly the holy offices were celebrated in that monastery. O God, he said, how different these religious are from ours! They sing like angels and we like brute animals. The next day, wanting to verify for himself what he had learned from his companion's account, he saw monks in their stalls, lined up like marble statues in their niches, motionless, making no gesture except that of psalmody, which they did with a truly angelic attention and devotion, according to the custom of that holy order. Then the young man, overwhelmed with admiration, was seized with an extreme consolation at seeing God worshipped so well by Catholics, and decided, as he then did, to enter the bosom of the Church, the true and only bride of him who had visited him with his inspiration in the dishonourable bed of infamy in which he

lay.

Another anecdote also shows that Francis de Sales was not unaware of the rebellious spirit of the Parisians, which made them "abhor commands". It was about a man "who, after living eighty years in the city of Paris, without ever leaving it, as soon as he was ordered by the king to remain there the rest of his days, he immediately went out to see the countryside, something he had never wanted to do in all his life."

Humanities

The Jesuits at the time were urged on by their origins. Francis de Sales spent ten years in their college, covering the entire curriculum of studies, moving from grammar to classical studies to rhetoric and philosophy. As an external pupil, he lived not far from the college with his tutor, Fr Déage, and his three cousins, Amé, Louis et Gaspard.

The Jesuit method involved a lecture by the teacher (*praelectio*), followed by numerous exercises by the students such as writing verses and speeches, study of the lectures, declamations, conversations and disputations (*disputatio*) in Latin. To motivate their students, teachers appealed to two 'inclinations' present in the human soul: pleasure, fuelled by imitation of the ancients, a sense of beauty and the pursuit of literary perfection; and striving or emulation, encouraged by a sense of honour and a prize for the winners. As for religious motivations, they were first and foremost about seeking the greater glory of God (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*).

Going through Francis' writings, one realises the extent to which his Latin culture was extensive and profound, even if he did not always read the authors in the original text. Cicero has his place there, but rather as a philosopher; he is a great spirit, if not the greatest "among pagan philosophers". Virgil, prince of the Latin poets, is not forgotten: in the middle of a paragraph a line from the *Aeneid*

or the *Eglogues* suddenly appears, embellishing the sentence and stimulating curiosity. Pliny the Elder, author of *Natural History*, would provide Francis de Sales with an almost inexhaustible reserve of comparisons, "similes" and curious, often phantasmagorical data.

At the end of his literary studies, he obtained the "bachelor's degree" that opened up access to philosophy and the "liberal arts".

Philosophy and the "liberal arts"

The "liberal arts" encompassed not only philosophy proper, but also mathematics, cosmography, natural history, music, physics, astronomy, chemistry, all "intermingled with metaphysical considerations". The Jesuits' interest in the exact sciences, closer in this to Italian humanism than to French humanism, should also be noted.

Francis de Sales' writings show that his studies in philosophy left traces in his mental universe. Aristotle, "the greatest brain" of antiquity can be found everywhere in Francis. To Aristotle, he wrote, we owe this "ancient axiom among philosophers, which every man desires to know". What struck him most about Aristotle was that he had written "an admirable treatise on the virtues". As for Plato, he regards him as a "great spirit", if not "the greatest". He greatly esteemed Epictetus, "the best man in all paganism".

Knowledge concerning cosmography, corresponding to our geography, was made possible by the travels and discoveries of the time. Completely unaware of the cause of the phenomenon of magnetic north, he was well aware that "this polar star" is the one "towards which the needle of the compass constantly tends; it is thanks to it that helmsmen are guided on the sea and can know where their routes take them". The study of astronomy opened his spirit to the knowledge of the new Copernican theories.

As for music, he confides that without being a connoisseur of it, he nevertheless enjoyed it "very much". Gifted with an innate sense of harmony in everything, he

nevertheless admitted he knew the importance of discordance, which is the basis of polyphony: “For music to be beautiful, it is required not only that the voices be clear, sharp and distinct, but also that they be linked together in such a way as to constitute a pleasing consonance and harmony, by virtue of the union existing in the distinction and the distinction of the voices, which, not without reason, is called a discordant chord, or rather, a concordant discord”. The lute is often mentioned in his writings, which is hardly surprising, knowing that the 16th century was the golden age of this instrument.

Extracurricular activities

School did not entirely absorb the life of our young man, who also needed relaxation. From 1560 onwards, the Jesuits initiated new possibilities such as reducing the daily timetable, inserting recreation between school and study hours, relaxing after meals, creating a spacious “courtyard” for recreation, walking once a week and excursions. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* recalls the games he had to participate in during his youth, when he lists “the game of court tennis, ball, ring races, chess and other board games”. Once a week, on Thursdays, or if this was not possible, on Sundays, an entire afternoon was set aside for fun in the countryside.

Did the young Francis attend and even participate in drama/theatre at the Clermont college? More than likely, because the Jesuits were the promoters of plays and moral comedies presented in public on a stage, or on platforms set up on trestles, even in the college church. The repertoire was generally inspired by the Bible, the lives of the saints, especially the acts of the martyrs, or the history of the Church, without excluding allegorical scenes such as the struggle of virtues against vices, dialogues between faith and the Church, between heresy and reason. It was generally considered that such a performance was well worth a good sermon.

Riding, fencing and dancing

His father watched over Francis' complete training as a perfect gentleman and the proof lies in the fact that he required him to engage in learning the "arts of nobility" or the arts of chivalry in which he himself excelled. Francis had to practise riding, fencing and dancing.

As for fencing, it is known that it distinguished the gentleman, just as carrying a sword was part of the privileges of the nobility. Modern fencing, born in Spain at the beginning of the 15th century, had been codified by the Italians, who made it known in France.

Francis de Sales sometimes had the opportunity to show his prowess in wielding the sword during royal or simulated assaults, but throughout his life he would fight against duelling challenges that often ended in the death of a contender. His nephew recounted that during his mission to Thonon, unable to stop two "wretches" who "were fencing with bare swords" and "kept crossing their swords against each other", "the man of God, relying on his skill, which he had learned a long time ago, hurled himself at them and defeated them to such an extent that they regretted their unworthy action."

As for dance that had acquired noble titles in Italian courts, it seems to have been introduced to the French court by Catherine de' Medici, wife of Henry II. Did Francis de Sales participate in any ballet, figurative dance, accompanied by music? It is not impossible, because he had his acquaintances in some of the great families.

In themselves, he would later write in the *Introduction*, dances are not a bad thing; it all depends on the use one makes of them: "Playing, dancing is licit when done for fun and not for affection". Let us add to all these exercises the learning of courtesy and good manners, especially with the Jesuits who paid much attention to "civility", "modesty" and "honesty".

Religious and moral formation

On the religious level, the teaching of Christian doctrine and catechism was of great importance in Jesuit colleges. The catechism was taught in all classes, learnt by heart in the lower ones following the *disputatio* method and with prizes for the best. Public competitions were sometimes organised with a religiously motivated staging. Sacred singing, which the Lutherans and Calvinists had developed greatly, was cultivated. Particular emphasis was placed on the liturgical year and festivals, using "stories" from Holy Scripture.

Committed to restoring the practice of the sacraments, the Jesuits encouraged their students not only to attend daily Mass, not at all an exceptional custom in the 16th century, but also to frequent Eucharistic communion, frequent confession, and devotion to the Virgin and the saints. Francis responded fervently to the exhortations of his spiritual teachers, committing himself to receive communion "as often as possible", "at least every month."

With the Renaissance, the *virtus* of the ancients, duly Christianised, returned to the fore. The Jesuits became its promoters, encouraging their pupils to effort, personal discipline and self-reformation. Francis undoubtedly adhered to the ideal of the most esteemed Christian virtues, such as obedience, humility, piety, the practice of the duty of one's state, work, good manners and chastity. He later devotes the entire central part of his *Introduction* to "the exercise of the virtues".

Bible study and theology

On a carnival Sunday in 1584, while all of Paris went out to have a good time, his tutor saw Francis looking worried. Not knowing whether he was ill or sad, he proposed that he attend the carnival. To this proposal the young man responded with this prayer taken from Scripture: "Turn away my eyes from vain things", and added: "*Domine, fac ut videam*". See what? "Sacred theology", was his reply; "it will teach me what God wants my soul to learn." Fr Déage, who was preparing

his doctorate at the Sorbonne, had the wisdom not to oppose the desire of his heart. Francis became enthusiastic about the sacred sciences to the point of skipping meals. His tutor gave him his own course notes and allowed him to attend public debates on theology.

The source of this devotion was to be found not so much in the theological courses at the Sorbonne, but rather in the exegesis lectures held at the Royal College. After its foundation in 1530, this College witnessed the triumph of new trends in Bible study. In 1584, Gilbert Genebrard, a Benedictine from Cluny, commented on the *Song of Songs*. Later, when he composed his *Treatise,* the bishop of Geneva remembered this master and named him "with reverence and emotion, because" he wrote, "I was his pupil, though an unsuccessful one, when he taught at the royal college in Paris." Despite his philological rigour, Genebrard passed on to him an allegorical and mystical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, which enchanted him. As Father Lajeunie writes, Francis found in this sacred book "the inspiration of his life, the theme of his masterpiece and the best source of his optimism."

The effects of this discovery were not long in coming. The young student experienced a period marked by exceptional fervour. He joined the Congregation of Mary, an association promoted by the Jesuits, which brought together the spiritual elite of the students of their college, of which he soon became the assistant and then the "prefect". His heart was inflamed with the love of God. Quoting the psalmist, he said he was "drunk with the abundance" of God's house, filled with the torrent of divine "voluptuousness". His greatest affection was reserved for the Virgin Mary, "beautiful as the moon, shining like the sun'."

Devotion in crisis

This sensitive fervour lasted for a time. Then came a crisis, a "strange torment", accompanied by "fear of sudden death and God's judgement." According to the testimony of Mother Chantal, "he almost completely ceased eating and

sleeping and became very thin and pale as wax." Two explanations have attracted the attention of commentators: temptations against chastity and the question of predestination. It is not necessary to dwell on the temptations. The way of thinking and acting of the surrounding world, the habits of certain companions who frequented "dishonest women", offered him examples and invitations capable of attracting any young man of his age and condition.

Another reason for crisis was the question of predestination, a topic that was on the agenda among theologians. Luther and Calvin had made it their battle-horse in the dispute over justification by faith alone, regardless of the "merits" that man can acquire through good works. Calvin had decisively affirmed that God "determined what He intended to do for each individual man; for He does not create them all in the same condition, but destines some to eternal life, others to eternal damnation." At the Sorbonne itself, where Francis took courses, it was taught, on the authority of St Augustine and St Thomas, that God had not decreed the salvation of all men.

Francis believed that he was a reprobate in God's eyes and destined for eternal damnation and hell. At the height of his anguish, he made a heroic act of selfless love and abandonment to God's mercy. He even came to the conclusion, absurd from a logical point of view, of willingly accepting to go to hell but on condition that he did not curse the Supreme Good. The solution to his "strange torment" is known, in particular, through the confidences he gave to Mother Chantal: one day in January 1587, he entered a nearby church and, after praying in the chapel of the Virgin, it seemed to him that his illness had fallen at his feet like "scales of leprosy".

Actually, this crisis had some really positive effects on Francis' spiritual development. On the one hand, it helped him move from sensitive, perhaps selfish and even narcissistic devotion to pure love, stripped of all self-interested and childish gratification. And on the other, it

opened his spirit to a new understanding of God's love, which wants the salvation of all human beings. Certainly, he would always defend the Catholic doctrine about the necessity of works to be saved, faithful in this to the definitions of the Council of Trent, but the term "merit" would not enjoy his sympathies. The true reward of love can only be love. We are here at the root of Salesian optimism.

Balance

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the ten years the young Francis de Sales spent in Paris. He concluded his studies there in 1588 with the licence and degree "in the arts", which opened the way for him to higher studies in theology, law and medicine. Which did he choose, or rather, which were imposed on him by his father? Knowing the ambitious plans his father had for his eldest son, one understands that the study of law was his preference. Francis went on to study law at the University of Padua, in the Republic of Venice.

From the age of eleven to twenty-one, that is, during the ten years of his adolescence and young adulthood, Francis was a student of the Jesuits in Paris. The intellectual, moral and religious formation he received from the priests of the Society of Jesus would leave an imprint that he would retain throughout his life. But Francis de Sales retained his originality. He was not tempted to become a Jesuit, but rather a Capuchin. 'Salesianity' would always have features that were too special to be simply assimilated to other ways of being and reacting to people and events.