

□ Reading time: 11 min.

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:

1. 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”.