

□ Reading time: 10 min.

“Valiant, obedient, a good citizen and magnanimous”—such were, according to Francis de Sales, some of the qualities of a man concerned with the public good. Valiant, he explained, makes me “undertake perilous things for good reason”; obedience is due “to the prince I serve”; magnanimity consists “in the greatness of this action” that one undertakes for the common good. Finally, to be a “good citizen”, one must have “love for the public” and “affection for one’s homeland”. Even though the word citizen under the Ancien Régime still only referred to the inhabitant of a town, we can see that the expression “good citizen” was linked to “love for the public”.

Loving and serving one’s country

The good citizen loves his country, which means he prefers it to any other “in affection”, but not necessarily “in esteem”, for nothing prevents one from recognising the value, or even the superiority, of others, a bit like what happens in marriage:

Wives must prefer their husbands to all others, not in honour, but in affection; thus, everyone prefers their country in love and not in esteem, and every boatman cherishes the vessel in which he sails more than others, though they be richer and better supplied.

Attachment to his own, to his family, to his country, to his friends, to his “flock”, turned into nostalgia when he was far away. Thus, in 1618, at the beginning of his last stay in Paris, he wrote to one of his correspondents, “I am here until Easter; and believe me, my dearest daughter, since it must be so, I am here with a good heart, but a heart that would be greatly pleased to be among our little things and in my own country.”

Love of country was then conflated with obedience to the prince and the service owed to him. Learning loyalty to the sovereign and service to the State was part of one’s education. Having arranged for one of his nephews to be admitted as a page at the court of Turin, he considered that this favour would allow the boy to “learn in his childhood the first elements of that service to which his birth obliges him to devote his entire life”.

Even as a bishop, Francis de Sales behaved as a faithful, loyal, and devoted subject of the House of Savoy. When he foresaw dangers, he warned the Duke; he advised an alliance when he judged it “extremely useful to the affairs” of his master. When

he learned that the Duke of Nemours was plotting against the Duke of Savoy, he prudently refrained from associating with him, citing the 'old teaching'. "A bishop's place is in his sheepfold and not at court", and ending with this brilliant comparison, "I do not burn my wings at this flame." When Savoy was in danger, he earnestly begged him to bring his courage "to the defence of this blood, of this house, of this crown, of this State."

However, if Francis de Sales is a faithful servant, he is not a fawning and self-interested courtier. Indeed, there are many ways to serve the prince:

Those who serve princes for self-interest ordinarily perform services that are more eager, more ardent and more conspicuous; but those who serve out of love perform them more nobly, more generously, and consequently more estimably.

Be that as it may, Francis de Sales advocated obedience as the primary civic virtue, certainly because he considered it "a moral virtue that depends on justice". He recommended it to Philothea. "You must obey your political superiors, that is to say, your prince and the magistrates he has established over your country." Until the end of his life, Francis de Sales demonstrated a sense of civic duty. It was out of obedience to the Duke that, despite his state of health, he undertook his final journey, which led him to Avignon and Lyon, where he died.

Overcoming certain social barriers

The society in which Francis de Sales lived was composed of very diverse strata, which were, moreover, separated by barriers. There were "the ecclesiastics, the nobles, those of the long robe, and the populace or third estate."

When something went wrong, everyone blamed the others, he said in a sermon: the people accuse the nobility, the nobility incriminates the "ministers of justice", the latter denounce the soldiers, the soldiers shift the blame onto the captains, the captains disparage the princes. In conclusion, "it is permitted to speak ill without danger, in this time in which we live, of no one except the Church, of which everyone is a censor, everyone criticises it." The conclusion is obvious; let everyone examine themselves and take responsibility.

If the division of citizens is an evil that can produce the worst, unity is strength, as the proverb says. "The seditions and internal troubles of a republic ruin it entirely and prevent it from resisting foreigners." When there were "dissensions and varieties of conceptions," he firmly recalled that "the union and bond of minds" is "necessary for any good enterprise." In certain cases, the "good of the city" required that some renounce "their particular opinion" and that a decision be made

to “resume anew the general consent, to oppose it to the judgement of individuals.” Even the nuns of the Visitation had to be reminded of the principle of the equality of persons and, if necessary, to denounce this great misery of honours. “One overestimates oneself above others and then comes to say, I am from such a house and that one from another”. One day, he told them the story of a marshal’s daughter, who could not bring herself to call ‘Sister’ another nun who was of low birth. According to him, one had to strip oneself “of the desire to be esteemed for being from a good house and something more than others.” He even exclaimed:

Oh! we are all equal, for we are all children of the same father and the same mother, of Adam and Eve; it is therefore a great folly to glory in one’s lineage.

When justice is wronged

A good citizen is characterised by his sense of justice. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of opportunities to denounce injustices. Francis de Sales frequently did so from the pulpit. Thus, in the ardour of his youth as a preacher, he one day took on, in turn, various categories of fraudsters: the artisan, “who oversells his merchandise”; the pettifogger, “who over a trifle maintains a lawsuit that ruins the soul, body, and house of two miserable parties”; the judge, in no hurry to render justice and “who makes it so long, excuses himself with ten thousand reasons of custom, style, theory, practice, and cunning”; the usurer, who deceives himself by making Scripture lie; the priests, who flatter themselves with dispensations to serve two masters; and the ladies, who take pleasure in being courted while “excusing themselves that they do no acts contrary to their honour”. Commercial practices, he thought, rarely go without deception, which made him say that “buyers and sellers are ordinarily thieves, if they are not God-fearing and do not take great care to watch over their hearts.”

In certain particular circumstances, the bishop knew full well that good words and alms were not enough. He then made it his duty to intervene directly with the competent authorities to defend the rights of threatened people. For “one must not only be disposed not to neglect the innocent,” he wrote, “but one must join with him for the defence of his cause.”

In times of famine, he railed against “ladies who kill sheep to feed a small, cowardly, and pampered dog.” During armed conflicts, he requested for his “poor good people” exemption from the burdens of war and called for the king’s protection and alms for the Catholics of the Pays de Gex. The law of the Gospel excludes all war, recalls Francis de Sales, who added, “however, war is permitted because of the malice of men; one may repel force with force.” The worst are the

people who profit from it, “who enrich and fatten themselves on it.”

Justice often seems a challenge in this world, ever unstable, constantly oscillating between hell and paradise. While for Christians these two realities are part of the hereafter, one can nevertheless find suggestive images of them here below.

When someone lives in “a calamitous, tyrannised republic” by a “cursed king”, it is hell; the inhabitants there “suffer unspeakable torments”; the eyes see “the horrible vision of devils and of hell”; the ears never hear anything but “weeping, lamentations, and despair.”

Paradise, on the contrary, is a “happy city”, where everyone lives “in the consolation of a happy and indissoluble society.” How good it is to consider “the nobility, the beauty, and the multitude of the citizens and inhabitants of this happy country!” And Francis exclaimed, “Oh! how desirable and amiable this place is, how precious this city is!” or again, “Oh! how happy this company is!”

Naturally, the ideal city does not exist on earth, but that is no reason not to work to make it a little less unworthy of such a model. Justice and peace are the goods that civil society and the “Christian republic” demand. Now, “one must yield to the necessity of one’s neighbour,” when he clamours for them.

“The republic is attached to religion” and “religion is attached to the republic”

A man of the Church above all, Francis de Sales wished to be a stranger to directly political affairs. In a time of controversies with the Protestants, when Catholics and even many religious figures were drawn to politics and political solutions, he clearly distinguished the domains, admitting a certain form of autonomy for the temporal. He wrote to the governor of Savoy:

As for me, I protest to you that I am ignorant of affairs of state, and wish to be ignorant of them to such a point that they are neither in my thoughts, nor in my care, nor on my lips, unless some occasion should present itself to testify to His Highness that I am his passionate and faithful subject.

The bishop wanted above all to form good ministers of God. For him, the priest should not meddle in temporal and political questions. He would make the same recommendation to the future Cardinal Richelieu, whom he met in Tours in 1619, when he was still only Bishop of Luçon, but already Secretary of State. He would write to Mother de Chantal:

I got to know a great many prelates, and particularly M. the Bishop of Luçon, who swore me all friendship and told me that he would finally join my side, to think of

nothing but God and the salvation of souls.

The sequel would show that these good intentions would not last, or at least that the Cardinal would interpret them in his own way.

Should one, for all that, be disinterested in the temporal happiness of one's compatriots? "He who does not love the public good very much, does not trouble himself much if it is ruined," he writes in the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Politics, moreover, is not foreign to religion and conscience. Contrary to the Protestant minister who wanted to separate the two domains, under the pretext that honour is due to God alone, the author of the *Defence of the Standard of the Holy Cross* replied "that it is to cut too much from the honour due to God to remove from it the civil and political."

Francis de Sales was therefore not tempted to eliminate religion from public life. While admitting a certain secularity of the State, or at least a diversification of civil and religious tasks, he thought that princes had an interest in reflecting on the advantages of religion. For its part, the Church did not hesitate to "implore" the help of the "secular arm", especially when Catholicism was threatened or morality was in peril.

According to Saint Francis de Sales, "the republic is attached to religion as the body to the soul, and religion to the republic as the soul to the body." Union and distinction were the two principles that, according to him, governed the relations between Church and State. The idea of separation did not enter into this scheme, whose model was in the relationship between the body and the soul. The misfortune was that politics used religion and that the spiritual power was, as it were, subservient to the temporal power of the prince. The Bishop of Geneva complained about this to his friend, the Bishop of Belley:

What an abjection that we have the spiritual sword in hand and that, as mere executors of the will of the temporal magistrate, we must strike when he orders it and cease when he commands it, and that we are deprived of the principal key of those that Our Lord has given us, which is that of judgement, discernment, and knowledge in the use of our sword!

His attitude as an obedient subject of the Duke of Savoy was accompanied by an enlightened sense of his own rights. He always considered himself Prince of Geneva, that is, the legitimate temporal sovereign of the city of which Calvin and the Huguenot party had taken control. In December 1601, at the request of Msgr. de Granier, he had written a memorandum intended to provide historical proof of this.

The beginning, as clear as could be, declared that the Bishop of Geneva is “the sole legitimate sovereign prince of Geneva and its dependencies, notwithstanding that the lord dukes of Savoy, as successors of the counts of Geneva on the one hand, and the citizens of Geneva on the other, claim the contrary.”

Finally, to guarantee the peace of the States and of the Church, it was better not to stir up certain questions relating to the authority of the Holy See in temporal affairs, particularly concerning the pope’s power to depose kings. When Robert Bellarmine, “that great and famous cardinal”, “that most excellent theologian”, wrote on the pope’s order that his power also extended to the temporal affairs of kings, Francis de Sales was not pleased and he wrote as much to one of his friends with Gallican tendencies:

No, I did not even find to my taste certain writings of a holy and most excellent prelate, in which he touched upon the indirect power of the pope over princes; not that I judged whether this is so or not, but because in this age when we have so many enemies without, I believe that we should stir nothing within the body of the Church.

Citizen of the world

The education of the good citizen in a humanist vision cannot be limited to the small homeland, and one of its tasks consists in cultivating a sense of the universal. Knowledge of the other peoples of the world was facilitated by the creation of the first geographical maps:

Those who on four or five sheets of paper show Rome, Paris, Vienna and the greatest cities of France, mark with small dots what the size and situation of the places are, although this is nothing in comparison to what is; but those who understand and who know geography understand thereby what Paris, Rome, Vienna, and others are.

Loving one’s country does not authorise contempt for others. The author of the Introduction warns against a habit where “everyone gives themselves the liberty to judge and censure princes and to speak ill of entire nations, according to the diversity of affections one has for them.” According to one of his close associates, the Bishop of Geneva “held all disparagement in horror and did not even approve of alluding to those vices that authors ordinarily attribute to certain nations.”

The Christian, above all, is open in principle to the whole world. If I want only the will of God, he exclaimed, “what does it matter to me whether I am sent to Spain or

to Ireland? And if I seek only his cross, why should it vex me that I am sent to the Indies, to the new lands or to the old, since I am assured that I will find it everywhere?"

A concrete way of opening oneself to the universal is the learning of languages. He admired Mithridates, king of Pontus, who, according to Pliny, "knew twenty-two languages". In his funeral oration for the Duke of Mercœur, he praised this great personage because he "also had the use of eloquence and the grace to express his beautiful conceptions well, not only in this our French language, but even in German, Italian and Spanish;" at the head of his troops, he knew how "to speak to each one in his own language, French, German, Italian."

His openness to the universal would become more and more apparent as he advanced in age and experience. Towards the end of his life, to show his perfect indifference to the journeys and missions that awaited him outside of Savoy, he would write this significant declaration, "I am no longer of this country, but of the world."