 Reading time: 10 min.

Life is not only made up of work and serious occupations; it is also punctuated by moments of rest, relaxation, and "recreation". For a man interested in formation and education like Francis de Sales, this dimension of human life could not fail to attract his attention. Certainly, his approach to this topic is primarily ethical: he is not interested in relaxation and play in themselves; one does not find in him a reflection on the educational value of this or that game or amusement. He is rather concerned with defining the conditions that make amusements necessary, useful, good, indifferent, or harmful, depending on the case. However, he also demonstrates his humanism on this subject, thanks to his openness of spirit and heart to all that is human and, in particular, to what concerns youth.

The necessity of rest and relaxation

"Every now and then it is necessary to rest the body and spirit with some form of recreation," states the author of the *Philothea*. Even in the Visitandine monasteries, recreation is an indispensable moment:

The sisters need relaxation – he states – and, above all, the novices must have good recreation. One must not keep the spirit continuously tense, under penalty of becoming melancholic. I would not want someone to feel scrupulous if they had spent an entire recreation talking about indifferent things; on another occasion, they will talk about good things.

The chapter of the *Philothea* dedicated to "pastimes and recreations" enumerates a number of activities common at the time, which were considered "permitted and praiseworthy":

Taking the air, walking, conversing joyfully and amiably with someone, playing the lute or another instrument, singing, hunting are all recreations so honest that, to use them well, a little common prudence is sufficient, which attributes to everything the appropriate place, time, location, and measure.

The list begins with two types of relaxation that form a whole: taking the air and walking, two aspects of the same relaxing activity. "Taking the air" is like the bird that "takes the air and flees," rises and flies away with outstretched wings, while the wanderer uses his feet. Walking can be referred to, at first glance, what the author says about the necessity of well-done recreations, as it has the dual advantage of relaxing both the spirit and the body.

Giving walking “the appropriate place, time, location, and measure” means that this activity comes after serious occupations, which are part of everyone’s duties. The time to dedicate to it evidently depends on what is necessary and advisable for each person.
Walking can be a good remedy in case of overwork: “When excessive work caused him some discomfort – recounts his friend Monsignor Camus – his doctor advised him to take a breath of fresh air, to spend some time walking, for a few days, in order to eliminate, with these relaxations, the bad humours he had accumulated and which made him heavy.” Very obedient to the doctor, the bishop would go for a walk “in a large garden.”

Games of skill

In Francis de Sales’ time, “pallacorda, pallone, pallamaglio, corsa agli anelli” were in vogue. The game of *pallacorda* is the ancestor of tennis: one returned the ball to the other, over a rope, with the palm of the hand or with a racket. The passion for this game must have been strong, if it suggested this warning, “Playing ball for a long time does not mean resting the body, but exhausting it.”
The game of pallone would one day serve him to describe the contempt for honours. “Who is it that receives it best in the game of pallone? He who throws it furthest.” Pallamaglio, the ancestor of cricket and golf, consisted of throwing and hitting a hard wooden ball with a kind of mallet, a stick with a hammer-like end. It is known that there was a game of pallamaglio in Annecy, on the shores of the lake.
As for the game of rings, it consisted of running while threading a series of rings onto a stick held in one’s hand. It required great concentration, which made him say, “Those who run the race of rings do not think at all about the public watching them, but about running a good race to win.”
All these games that involve a great expenditure of energy are particularly suitable for young people. Francis de Sales recommends them to a young man, adding horse riding, “Train yourselves in pastimes that require strength, such as riding, jumping, and other similar games.”
Whoever plays, obviously does so for pleasure and to please others. But care must be taken that the game does not turn into an addiction, from which one can no longer free oneself. Our affections are so precious – he used to say – “that they demand not to be entangled in useless things.”

Board games

Chess and “table” games are among the “amusements good and honest in themselves” (I III 31). Table games designated all games for which a table was

necessary, in particular checkers and chess. The latter game could turn into a passion difficult to moderate over time, so that “after playing chess for five or six hours, one emerges dead tired and empty in spirit.”
Gambling games with dice or cards, in which money is played and sometimes large sums are involved, are frankly inadvisable. In the chapter on “forbidden games,” the author of the Philothea took the trouble to explain three reasons against gambling. First, “in these games one does not win by reason, but by chance, which very often rewards those who by skill or industriousness deserved absolutely nothing.” Secondly, they are not truly games, but rather “violent occupations”. In them, “the spirit is entirely concentrated and tense in continuous attention, and entirely agitated by perpetual anxieties, fears, and worries.” Finally, the joy of the winner is the joy of one person only, “since it is obtained only at the expense and with the displeasure of the companion.”
The passion for gambling can lead the player to total ruin. “He who gets used to playing testoni, will later play scudi, then pistole, then horses and, after horses, all his fortune.” For all these reasons, Francis de Sales warns the young man who is “about to set sail on the vast sea of the court” against the risks of gambling. But as always in Francis de Sales, there is an exception; one can play a gambling game to please another, out of “condescension”. “Gambling games, which would otherwise be reprehensible, are no longer so if this or that time we play them out of just condescension.”

Cultural amusements

After dancing, the author of the *Philothea* enumerates as a source of recreation and amusement certain artistic activities, such as “comedies,” a term that then designated any theatrical performance, as well as “playing” the lute or any other instrument and “singing music.” Music is made “to gladden” the ear. There is a great difference “between written music and sung music.” Music is a source of pleasure, but the pleasure is more or less great “according to whether the ears are more or less delicate”:

Not everyone, in this world, is able to understand the sound and harmony of music in the same way. He who has somewhat harder hearing cannot grasp all the nuances that are put into play to make the melody perfect, even if he understands and knows music, which is instead possible for one who has a finer ear; and although the former enjoys the sweetness he experiences in listening to that music, he does not experience as great a pleasure as one who has a finer ear, although both are content.

Singing involves a certain effort, but singing uplifts. “The pilgrim who cheerfully sings on his journey concretely adds the fatigue of singing to that of walking, and nevertheless with such an increase of fatigue, he encourages himself and alleviates the effort of the march.” However, one should not “do like singers who, by trying a motet too much, become hoarse.”
There are still other means of relaxation such as reading and also writing. One reads or writes not only to instruct oneself or others, but also to recreate oneself and others. One also takes pleasure in writing, and the author of *Theotimus* willingly confessed this to his reader:

As carvers of precious pearls, feeling that their sight is tired from keeping it fixed on delicate features of their work, willingly keep some splendid emerald before them, so that by admiring its green from time to time, they can recreate themselves and rest their tired eyes. In the same way, in these multiple occupations that my condition incessantly accumulates for me, I always have small projects on religious themes to deal with, which I think about when I can, to uplift and rest my spirit.

Feasts, banquets and “pomp”

While Protestants had suppressed most feasts, Catholics continued to celebrate numerous feasts, particularly those of Our Lady and the saints. For Francis de Sales, “Sundays and holy feasts” are different days from others, so “generally one dresses better.”
Besides the religious feasts “commanded by the Church” and “recommended by it,” there are “civil feasts,” such as the one celebrated in Lyon on the occasion of Louis XIII’s entry into that city. The Bishop of Geneva was also celebrated during his pastoral visits, as at his solemn entry into Bonneville:

My dear Daughter, what good people I found amidst such high mountains! What honour, what welcome, what veneration for their bishop! The day before yesterday I arrived in that town in the middle of the night; but the inhabitants had prepared so many lights and so much festivity that everything was illuminated.

On the occasion of feasts, banquets are organised and people dress “with great pomp.” Now, “banquets, pomp” are among the things that Francis de Sales placed among those that “in substance are not at all bad, but indifferent.” Everything depends on the use made of them.
Preparing a good meal is a demonstration of friendship; indeed, “how can one more genuinely express the desire that a friend enjoy a good meal, than by preparing him a tasty and exquisite banquet?”

But one must not fall into excesses, “Those who, finding themselves at a feast, taste every course and eat a little of everything, seriously ruin their stomach, to which they cause such severe indigestion that they do not sleep all night, being able to do nothing but vomit.” Weddings are great occasions for feasting and rejoicing, but it is not uncommon, the bishop noted, for “one to indulge in a thousand excesses in pastimes, banquets and chatter.”

“Joyful and amiable conversations”

Among the most common and pleasant pastimes of human society, there are finally familiar conversations, “joyful and amiable talks.” The topics discussed can be very diverse. According to Camus, the Bishop of Geneva did not disdain to talk with friends “about buildings, painting, music, hunting, birds, plants, gardens, flowers.” He knew how to draw in his own way “from all these things as many spiritual elevations.”

In the *Philothea*, Francis de Sales dedicates five chapters to the theme of Speaking. Between the two extremes, which are chattering and being taciturn, there is a space for conversing, whose main qualities must be amiability and good humour. Three defects destroy them: bad words, lying, and mockery.

Following Aristotle and Saint Thomas, Francis de Sales praises “eutrapelia,” a Greek word that designates pleasant conversation, and therefore Philothea must avoid “stupid and insolent laughter and joys,” such as “shouting at this one, slandering that one, poking fun at a third, harming a deficient person.”

Joy should not be reduced to a pure private feeling; it is also in a certain sense a social duty. Francis de Sales’ letters to his correspondents are full of advice of this kind. “Preserve the holy and cordial cheerfulness that nourishes the forces of the spirit and edifies one’s neighbour.” To “please” others, joy is indispensable: “I am greatly comforted by the joy that pervades your life; for God is indeed the God of joy.”

One can therefore joke and tell jests, to the great displeasure of the Avignon religious who had “publicly mocked him” because he had written in the *Philothea* “that during recreation one can tell jokes.” The example came from above:

Saint Louis, when the religious wanted to talk to him about important matters after lunch said, It is not the time to talk about them but to recreate oneself with something joyful and with jests; let everyone honestly say what they want.

If the words are “clean, civil, and honest,” what harm is there in all this? Francis de Sales often recommended joy, even to the Visitandines who might be tempted to neglect recreation. Duty, responsibilities, occupations entail obligations that easily

risk making us forget the “duty of joy.” Francis de Sales spoke from experience when he wrote:

One must not only do God’s will, but to be a devout person, one must do it cheerfully. If I were not a bishop, perhaps, knowing what that means, I would not want to be one. But being a bishop, not only am I obliged to fulfil what this heavy vocation requires, I must also fulfil it with joy; I must be pleased with it and consider it agreeable.

It will have been understood that joy did not always reside in all the “levels” of the human soul, but sometimes only at its “summit.”

Salesian humour

Finding himself short of news, to a curious friend who asked him for some, he replied, “All our news comes down to this; we have none at all.” Observing the small eccentricities of others lends itself well to a witty remark. To a spiritual daughter of his, a little presumptuous and self-sufficient, he throws this gently mocking barb, “I feel at ease because my books have found their way into your mind, which is so clever as to believe it is self-sufficient.” Can certain ladies of Chambéry be authorised to enter the monastery to see the nascent congregation? “I told them yes, provided they don’t wear long trains […] They are very good ladies, except for their vanity.”

The irony is very subtle in this passage of a sermon in which he mocks the false courtesy displayed when listening to the preacher. “When one is invited to lunch, one takes for oneself, but here one is extremely courteous, because one never stops giving to others.” The innumerable images and comparisons drawn in particular from animals often make one smile, because the bishop recalls not only “noble” animals like the lion or graceful ones like doves, but also monkeys, chickens, frogs, chameleons, and crocodiles.

A great question discussed among spiritual authors was whether it was permissible to laugh. In reality, there are two ways of laughing: “Mockery arouses laughter with contempt and disgust for one’s neighbour; a playful remark, on the other hand, provokes laughter in tranquil simplicity, out of confidence and intimate frankness, combined with the gentleness of words.” When the Bishop of Geneva taught catechism to children, he enjoyed “making those present laugh a little” by making fun of masks and dances, so much so that his audience “incited him with their applause to continue to be a child among children.”

Humour is the salt of conversation and one of the surest means of communicating with one’s neighbour. The Monsignor of Geneva had a certain taste for “wordplay.”

Speaking of gentleness with oneself, he gently mocks those who “having become angry, become angry because they became angry, get annoyed because they got annoyed and curse because they cursed.” Regarding some illusions that some people have about secrets well-kept in women’s monasteries, we find this pleasant observation, “There is no secret that does not secretly pass from one to another.” When he learns that his brother Jean-François will be his coadjutor and will soon relieve him of the burden of the diocese, he exclaims, “This is worth more than a cardinal’s hat.” This brother, impetuous and impatient by nature, would test his patience many times, to the point of making him write one day, “I think, my brother, that there is a very fortunate woman. Guess who she is. […] This very fortunate woman is the one you did not marry.” Another time he compared the three Sales brothers to three ingredients for a good salad:

Each of us three will prepare what is necessary for a good salad: Jean-François will prepare a good vinegar, because he is very strong; Louis will prepare the salt, because he is wise; and poor François is a good lad who will act as oil, so great is his esteem for gentleness.

Blessed is he who can laugh at himself!