 Reading time: 11 min.

The child, once grown, is destined to integrate more or less quickly into the social and economic fabric through studies or learning a trade. In Francis de Sales' time, for the vast majority of boys, "on-the-job" training began very early, to the point that they passed from childhood to adulthood without any intermediate stage. Those who, like the future Bishop of Geneva, followed a long curriculum of studies with a view to their destined career were rare.

Preparation for active life in society

Study and work primarily served those who dedicated themselves to them, but their usefulness normally extended to the family and society. As a student in Paris, young Francis expressed his ideal of life in terms of service. To a friend of his father who came to visit him, he wrote:

"Since I am in the best period of my studies, I will feel more strongly encouraged to continue the studies I have undertaken, which, as I dare to hope (without flattering myself), will lead me to the good end I desire with God's help, which is to be able to serve Him well first and, secondly, to render good services to you, to whom I owe so many duties of gratitude."

As can be seen, after serving God, Francis de Sales aimed to prepare himself to serve his neighbour.

Having become a bishop deeply integrated into the society of his time, he committed himself, according to his abilities, to helping young people form themselves. His bursar, Georges Rolland, informs us that Francis de Sales kept a young convert "in his house" for about a year, had him study at the Jesuit college in Chambéry, "also gave him food and clothing". To another young man he "had him learn, at his own expense, the trade of a grinder" and to yet another, "the trade of a stonemason." He sometimes had to hire young people for domestic services.

In a social context where the majority of people embraced a state of life and a profession without being able to truly choose, Francis de Sales taught them to make every type of "vacation" a vocation and a service. The two almost homonymous words "vacation" and "vocation" served him to enhance in each person their profession, duty, or specific task, to the point of making it a criterion even for devotion. He affirmed that everyone must learn to "pass from prayer to all the various types of activities that [their] commitments and [their] profession justly and legitimately require from [them]"; "a lawyer must know how to pass from prayer to

defence; the merchant to his business; the married woman to her family duties and domestic bustle." Everything had to be appropriate to each person's occupation. The purpose of the Philothea was also to teach a devotion that was "suitable for every kind of vocation and profession." Even humility, so esteemed by the author, had to be "in conformity with one's own vacation."

The value of work

Learning the "nobility" of work begins in the family. In a letter in Latin to the sons of his friend Antoine Favre, Francis de Sales invited them to model themselves on their father, playing on the meaning of the Latin word "*faber*":

You do very well to imitate the examples of your illustrious and excellent father, writing to me with such an affectionate tone. Imitate this model of yours with utmost respect; keep your gaze fixed, day and night, on his excellent examples, dearest friends. Thus, while you are now excellent apprentices [of Favre], you will emerge from his workshop as most noble artisans ("fabri nobilissimi").

The laborious life of the Bishop of Geneva could also serve as an incentive to work. In his letters, he often described himself as "surrounded," "distracted and hindered by a heap of work," "pulled here and there by affairs," "occupied and overwhelmed by business," with his spirit "stormed by so many commitments," immersed in "a world of duties," in a "sea of ordinary occupations" or in a "great tangle of affairs." He knew from experience that "the diversity and multiplicity of affairs weigh more than their own weight."

Likewise, when he wrote the *Philothea*, he deliberately addressed those who are "pressed by temporal affairs," people entrusted with "many worldly tasks," engaged in "common affairs and occupations," taken up with "manifold human duties."

But in all this, there is nothing extraordinary. "Man is born to work and the bird to fly," he wrote in a sermon outline on the theme of creation. The activity a person performs plays a positive role. According to a possible interpretation he liked to refer to, it is not man who guards the garden of Genesis, but rather the garden that guards man through work. David "fell into the temptation he had sought with idleness and doing nothing." Work puts temptation to flight. "Since idleness is the mother of all vices, a necessary and opportune occupation frees the soul from a thousand fantasies." In a vigorous oratorical plea, he emphasized this truth, addressing the idlers:

Arise from your bed, O lazy one, for it is time, and do not be afraid of the day's

work, for it is normal that, the night being made for rest, the following day is destined for work. Come out, I beg you, from your cowardice, and make it very clear in your spirit the truth that cannot be denied: that all must be tempted, all must be ready to fight, in order to achieve victory. Since temptation has an extraordinary hold on us when it finds us idle, let us therefore work and not grow weary.

Consequently, “do not be like the lazy who are troubled when they wake up at night with the worry that it will soon be day and they will have to work. The lazy and cowardly are afraid of everything and find everything arduous and difficult.” Francis de Sales, a constant preacher of peace, is concerned to be well understood, and so he specifies that “true peace does not consist in not fighting, but in winning.” No prevarication: “One must not waste time discussing when one must run, nor deliberate about difficulties when it is necessary to untangle them.” Tranquillity, so appreciated by him, is not indolence, because “tranquillity not exercised in the storm is an idle and deceptive tranquillity” and “peace is not just if it flees the work required to glorify the name of God.” “We must not stop at good when we can achieve better.”
“Let us continue to work well,” concludes Francis de Sales with optimism, “because there is no ground so ungrateful that the cultivator’s love cannot make it fertile.” Moreover, according to Saint Augustine, love makes work and suffering lighter: “Toil,” he says, “has no place where there is love, or, if it is present, it is loved.”

Dealing with affairs with care, but without anxiety or worry

The title of a chapter in the *Philothea* reads: “We must attend to our affairs with care, but without anxiety or worry.” It was one of the most recurring recommendations: “The care and diligence we must put into all our affairs are very different things from apprehension, anxiety, or worry.” Work can be a source of “happiness,” but on condition that it is performed with a “tranquil and peaceful spirit.” One must work diligently, constantly, but without haste, as Madame de Chantal does when she handles the spindle:

Always do this: always put your hand to some work; spin a little every day, both by day […] and by night, by lamplight […]. Make your plans a reality, and you will undoubtedly reap fruit. Be careful, however, not to be impatient; otherwise, you will get a tangled thread and you will dress your spindle very badly. Let us always walk, and however slowly we walk, we will always go a long way.

“Worry,” synonymous with agitation, is bad behaviour: “Do not rush into your

commitments: because every kind of haste disturbs reason and judgment and even prevents us from doing well the things for which we are frantic." Wisdom is well expressed by the ancient proverb: "One must hasten calmly" and do things "in order, one after another." Let us imitate the careful, but by no means agitated, cultivator: "Do you not know that it is precisely up to you to cultivate the land, plough it and sow it, but that only God makes it rain on the sown seed and makes it grow so that you can have a good harvest?"

But where does this agitation that sometimes overwhelms us come from? A good part of the discomfort and discontent we feel at work derives from desires and dreams that distract us from present occupations, in conformity with our state of life and our duties, to immerse us in an unreal world, beyond our reach and our task. The thought of the author of the *Philothea* is clear on this point:

I cannot in the least approve that a person with a duty or a commitment should dissipate themselves by desiring a different kind of life from that which conforms to their duty, or activities incompatible with their current condition; because this dissipates the concentration of the heart and makes it distracted in the necessary occupations.

How can we give quality to all our actions? This depends not only on the way we perform them, but also on the intention that guides them. We can, in fact, fulfil our commitments for selfish reasons or with a spirit of service. We can ensure that not only "important and significant undertakings" have quality, but also "small and humble things"; it is possible to value "great works, but also less important ones and even the lowest ones."
"Small and humble virtues," such as "service to the poor, visits to the sick, care of the family, with associated and connected activities, and fruitful diligence that will not leave you idle," have their just value that truly deserves to be appreciated. Between visions and ecstasies, Saint Catherine of Siena did not forget to "humbly turn the spit in the kitchen, stoke the fire, prepare food, knead bread, and perform all the humblest household chores."
Here is a very useful piece of advice to avoid agitation: let's take a short break from time to time, following the example of someone who has a long journey ahead. "The pilgrim who drinks a little wine to gladden his heart and refresh his mouth, although he lingers for a moment, does not thereby interrupt his journey; on the contrary, he gains strength to complete it sooner and more easily, since he stops only to go faster." In short, it is about tempering ardour and calm, passion and peace.

Helping the poor

Francis de Sales wanted to listen to “the cry of the poor and needy,” knowing not only that “there is an obligation to help one’s neighbours,” but that “it must be fulfilled.” He developed a “Salesian theology of poverty.” Evoking in a sermon the natural catastrophes that risked depriving farmers of the produce of their fields, when, following a disastrous drought, the storm threatened to destroy everything, he wrote:

Here comes a hot and impetuous wind, […] accompanied by threatening black clouds; […] with lightning, hail and storm it will destroy those few products that the drought has left in the fields and meadows […]. Then these poor farmers […], raising their hands to the dark sky, holding blessed candles, will implore the Creator to avert his wrath.

And what about the even “poorer shepherds who sleep on the bare ground, under bridges and in the woods?”

The bishop’s personal situation did not allow him to do all he would have liked for the needy. Like his predecessors, following the Protestant revolt, he had been deprived of his cathedral, his palace, and his main resources and revenues. Becoming bishop of the diocese of Geneva, “this miserable boat, all shattered and open inside,” he did not inherit a fortune. Nevertheless, from the beginning of his episcopate, Francis de Sales had established a rule for himself in which generosity towards those who turned to him in their need occupied a prominent place:

As for alms […], care must be taken that they are more substantial in winter than in summer, especially after the feast of the Magi, because then the poor need them more; therefore, legumes will be distributed. I do not know if it will be appropriate for the bishop to distribute alms with his own hands, when he sees that it can be done conveniently: such as on Wednesday of Holy Week or on Thursday and Friday of the Passion. On Maundy Thursday, on the occasion of the washing of the feet, a meal will be offered to the poor.

For a bishop like the one of Geneva, the problem of the poor constituted a fundamental and constant concern, in an era when the needy had no “right” to any protection or security. Therefore, the most ordinary means of helping the poor was almsgiving. Thus, he wrote to the wife of the president of the Parliament of Burgundy:

As for your alms, my dear daughter, always extend them a little more and in good measure, but with the discretion that I have told you in the past by word of mouth or in writing; for what you cast into the bosom of the earth produces scarce fruits from its fertility, while you well know that what you cast into the bosom of God will be returned to you, in one way or another, infinitely more fruitful.

If everyone is obliged to help their needy neighbour, one must nevertheless take into account the conditions and possibilities of each person. A head of a family, like a political leader, will have to think about the future of their respective institution.

Not only does charity not allow fathers of families to sell everything to give to the poor, but it commands them to honestly gather what is necessary for the education and sustenance of their wife, children, and servants; just as it orders kings and princes to have a treasury which, the fruit of just saving and not of tyrannical speculation, serves as an opportune defence against visible enemies.

As for him, the Bishop of Geneva was ready to go beyond certain conveniences. In 1622, during a stay in Turin, he learned of the anguish of the inhabitants of Annecy, prostrated by the occupation of French troops and the grain famine of that year. Abandoning the court, he said: “I leave here very content and firmly resolved, when I arrive in our diocese, to sell my mitre, my cross, my clothes, my vessels, and all that I possess to relieve the poor.”

Serving the poor

Solidarity with the poor manifests itself in many ways. Francis de Sales became the spokesman for those who had nothing. Following the misery caused by a natural disaster, he wrote to the Duke to ask him to abolish the tax:

Having seen in Sixt the appalling and irreparable prostration that occurred some years ago, following the landslide of a mountainside, I could not refuse my sincere testimony in favour of the just request of the local inhabitants, who appeal to your Highness’s clemency, to be exempted, in due proportion, from taxes. Therefore, I assure you that this misfortune has deprived them of a very considerable part of their goods, so that from being miserable they have become misery personified, upon which, as upon an object worthy of attention, your Highness’s charity will pour out its alms, as they hope.

The author of the *Philothea* also recommended to everyone “works useful for the service of God and neighbour,” which consisted in particular of “serving the sick,”

“helping the poor,” “gathering lost and strayed souls,” and also “promoting peace and harmony among people.” He approved of Baroness de Chantal preparing garments with her own hands destined “either for the altars or for the poor.”
But there are various degrees in the practice of almsgiving; in fact, “lending to the poor outside of grave necessity is the first degree of the counsel of almsgiving; a higher degree is simply giving, even higher still giving everything, and finally, even higher, giving one’s very person, consecrating it to the service of the poor.” When we serve the poor, they become important people:

Do you want to do even more, my Philothea? Then do not be content to be poor like the poor, but be even poorer than the poor. How can you do this? The servant is less than the master: therefore, make yourself a servant of the poor; go and attend to them in their beds when they are sick, and with your own hands; be their cook, and at your own expense; be their seamstress and laundress.

Saint Vincent de Paul, his disciple, would remember these recommendations when he taught that “the poor are our masters.” Francis de Sales would encourage Madame de Chantal to persevere in her service to the poor, despite the disgust she felt. “I am glad, my Daughter,” he wrote to her, “that you take care of the beds of the sick poor; and moreover, I am very glad that you feel, in this, a great repugnance, for this repugnance is a stronger reason for abjection than the stench and dirt that cause it.”
In his book entitled *Utopia*, Thomas More had dreamed of a country where people would live without *mine* and *thine*. For Francis de Sales, such an ideal had to be put into practice in the monasteries of the Visitandines: “If anyone wanted to have ‘mine’ and ‘thine’,” he told them frankly, “they would have to go and get it outside the house, because inside it is not even spoken of.”
The great Salesian principle, according to which “love makes lovers equal,” applies particularly to the case of poverty and the poor. By loving the poor, one becomes like them, which allows Francis de Sales to address this recommendation to Philothea:

Love the poor and poverty, because through this love you will truly become poor, since, says Scripture, we are made like the things we love. Love makes lovers equal: who is sick, that I am not sick with him too? says Saint Paul. He could also have said: who is poor, that I am not poor with him too?

Indeed, concludes the author of the *Philothea* with optimism, “love made him like

those he loved.”