 Reading time: 12 min.

A good number of ancient Christian ascetics often considered the body as an enemy, whose decay had to be confronted, in fact, as if it were an object of contempt and given no consideration. Numerous spiritual men of the Middle Ages did not care for the body except to inflict penances upon it. In most schools of the time, nothing was provided to allow “brother donkey” to rest.

For Calvino, human nature that was totally corrupted by original sin, could only be an “outhouse.” On the opposite front, numerous Renaissance writers and artists exalted the body to the point of paying it cult, in which sensuality played a significant role. Rabelais, for his part, glorified the bodies of his giants and took pleasure in showcasing even their less noble organic functions.

Salesian realism

Between the divinisation of the body and its contempt, Francis de Sales offers a realistic view of human nature. At the end of the first meditation on the theme of the creation of man, “the first being of the visible world,” the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* puts on the lips of Philothea this statement that seems to summarise his thought: “I want to feel honoured for the being that he has given me.” Certainly, the body is destined for death. With stark realism, the author describes the soul’s farewell to the body, which it will leave “pale, livid, disfigured, horrid, and foul-smelling,” but this does not constitute a reason to neglect and unjustly denigrate it while one is alive. Saint Bernard was wrong when he announced to those who wanted to follow him “that they should abandon their bodies and go to him only in spirit.” Physical evils should not lead to hating the body: moral evil is far worse.

We surely do not find any oblivion or overshadowing of bodily phenomena in Francis de Sales, as when he speaks of various forms of diseases or when he evokes the manifestations of human love. In a chapter of the *Treatise on the Love of God* titled: “That love tends to union,” he writes, for example, that “one mouth is applied to another in kissing to testify that we would desire to pour out one soul into the other, to unite them reciprocally in a perfect union.” This attitude of Francis de Sales towards the body already provoked scandalised reactions in his time. When Philothea appeared, an Avignonese religious publicly criticised this “little book,” tearing it apart and accusing its author of being a “corrupted and corrupting doctor.” An enemy of excessive modesty, Francis de Sales was not yet aware of the reserve and fears that would emerge in later times. Do medieval customs survive in him or is it simply a manifestation of his “biblical” taste? In any case, there is

nothing in him comparable to the trivialities of the “infamous” Rabelais.

The most esteemed natural gifts are beauty, strength, and health. Regarding beauty, Francis de Sales expressed himself while speaking of Saint Brigid: “She was born in Scotland; she was a very beautiful girl, since the Scots are naturally beautiful, and in that country, one finds the most beautiful creatures that exist.” Let us also think of the repertoire of images regarding the physical perfections of the bridegroom and the bride, taken from the *Song of Solomon*. Although the representations are sublimated and transferred to a spiritual register, they remain indicative of an atmosphere in which the natural beauty of man and woman is exalted. There were attempts to have him suppress the chapter of *Theotimus* on kissing, in which he demonstrates that “love tends to union,” but he always refused to do so. In any case, external beauty is not the most important: the beauty of the daughter of Zion is internal.

The close connection between body and soul

First of all, Francis de Sales affirms that the body is “a part of our person.” With a hint of tenderness, a personified soul can also say: “This flesh is my dear half, it is my sister, it is my companion, born with me, nourished with me.”

The bishop was very attentive to the existing bond between body and soul, between the health of the body and that of the soul. Thus, he writes of a person under his care, who was in poor health, that the health of her body “depends a lot on that of the soul, and that of the soul depends on spiritual consolations.” “Your heart has not weakened – he wrote to a sick woman – rather your body, and, given the very close ties that unite them, your heart has the impression of experiencing the pain of your body.” Everyone can see that bodily infirmities “end up creating discomfort even to the spirit, due to the close bonds between the one and the other.” Conversely, the spirit acts on the body to the point that “the body perceives the affections that stir in the heart,” as occurred with Jesus, who sat by Jacob’s well, tired from His heavy commitment to the service of the Kingdom of God.

However, since “the body and spirit often proceed in opposite directions, and as one weakens, the other strengthens,” and since “the spirit must reign,” “we must support and strengthen it so that it always remains its strongest.” So, if I take care of the body, it is “so that it may serve the spirit.”

In the meantime, we should be fair towards the body. In case of malaise or mistakes, it often happens that the soul accuses the body and mistreats it, as Balaam did with his donkey: “O poor soul! If your flesh could speak, it would say to you, as Balaam’s donkey: why do you beat me, miserable one? It is against you, my soul, that God arms His vengeance; you are the criminal.” When a person reforms

their inner self, the conversion will also manifest externally: in all attitudes, in the mouth, in the hands, and “even in the hair.” The practice of virtue makes a person beautiful internally and also externally. Conversely, an external change, a behaviour of the body can favour an inner change. An act of external devotion during meditation can awaken inner devotion. What is said here about spiritual life can easily be applied to education in general.

Love and dominance of the body

Speaking of the attitude one should have towards the body and physical realities, it is not surprising to see Francis de Sales that recommends Philothea, first of all, gratitude for the physical graces that God has given her.

We must love our body for several reasons: because it is necessary for us to perform good works, because it is a part of our person, and because it is destined to participate in eternal happiness. Christians must love their bodies as a living image of that of the incarnate Saviour, as coming from Him by kinship and consanguinity. Especially after we have renewed the covenant, truly receiving the body of the Redeemer in the adorable Sacrament of the Eucharist, and, with Baptism, Confirmation, and the other sacraments, we have dedicated and consecrated ourselves to supreme goodness.

Loving one’s own body is part of the love owed to oneself. In truth, the most convincing reason to honour and wisely use the body lies in a vision of faith, which the bishop of Geneva explained to the mother of Chantal after she recovered from an illness: “Take care of this body, for it is of God, my dearest Mother.” The Virgin Mary is presented at this point as a model: “With what devotion she must have loved her virginal body! Not only because it was a sweet, humble, pure body, obedient to holy love and totally imbued with a thousand sacred perfumes, but also because it was the living source of that of the Saviour and belonged to Him very closely, with a bond that has no comparison.”

The love of the body is indeed recommended, but the body must remain subject to the spirit, as the servant to his master. To control appetite, I must “command my hands not to provide the mouth with food and drink, except in the right measure.” To govern sexuality, “one must remove or give to the reproductive faculty the subjects, objects, and foods that excite it, according to the dictates of reason.” To the young man who is about to “set sail in the vast sea,” the bishop recommends: “I also wish you a vigorous heart that prevents you from pampering your body with excessive delicacies in eating, sleeping, or other things. It is known,

in fact, that a generous heart always feels a bit of contempt for bodily delicacies and delights."

In order for the body to remain subject to the law of the spirit, it is advisable to avoid excesses: neither mistreat it nor pamper it. In everything, moderation is necessary. The spirit of charity must prevail over all things. This leads him to write: "If the work you do is necessary for you or is very useful for the glory of God, I would prefer that you endure the pains of work rather than those of fasting." Hence the conclusion: "In general, it is better to have more strength in the body than is needed, rather than ruin it beyond what is necessary; because it is always possible to ruin it whenever one wants, but to recover it is not always enough to just want it."

What must be avoided is this "tenderness one feels for oneself." With fine irony but in a ruthless manner, he takes it out on an imperfection that is not only "characteristic of children, and, if I may dare to say, of women," but also of cowardly men, of whom he gives this interesting characteristic representation: "There are others who are compassionate towards themselves, and who do nothing but complain, coddle, pamper and look at themselves."

In any case, the bishop of Geneva took care of his body, as was his duty, and obeyed his doctor and the "nurses." He also took care of the health of others, giving advice on appropriate measures. He would write, for example, to the mother of a young student at the college of Annecy: "It is necessary to have Charles examined by doctors, so that his abdominal swelling does not worsen."

Hygiene is at the service of health. Francis de Sales desired that both the heart and the body be clean. He recommended decorum, very different from statements like that of Saint Hilary, according to which "one should not seek cleanliness in our bodies, which are nothing but pestilential carcasses and only full of infection." He was rather of the opinion of Saint Augustine and the ancient people who bathed "to keep their bodies clean from the dirt produced by heat and sweat, and also for health, which is certainly greatly aided by cleanliness."

In order to work and fulfil the duties of one's office, everyone should take care of their body regarding nutrition and rest: "To eat little, work a lot and with much agitation, and deny the body the necessary rest, is like demanding much from a horse that is exhausted without giving it time to chew a bit of fodder." The body needs to rest. This is quite evident. Long evening vigils are "harmful to the head and stomach," while, on the other hand, getting up early in the morning is "useful for both health and holiness."

Educating our senses, especially the eyes and ears

Our senses are wonderful gifts from the Creator. They connect us to the world and open us to all sensitive realities, to nature, to the cosmos. The senses are the door to the spirit, which they provide, so to speak, with the raw material; indeed, as the scholastic tradition says, “nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses.”

When Francis de Sales speaks of the senses, his interest leads him particularly to the educational and moral levels, and his teaching on this matter is connected to what he has presented about the body in general: admiration and vigilance. On the one hand, he says that God gives us “eyes to see the wonders of His works, a tongue to praise Him, and so for all the other faculties,” without ever omitting, and on the other, the recommendation to “set up sentinels for the eyes, the mouth, the ears, the hands, and the sense of smell.”

It is necessary to start with sight, because “among all the external parts of the human body, there is none, in terms of structure and activity, more noble than the eye.” The eye is made for light. This is demonstrated by the fact that the more beautiful, pleasant to the sight, and properly illuminated things are, the more the eye gazes at them with eagerness and liveliness. “From the eyes and words, one knows what the soul and spirit of a man are, for the eyes serve the soul as the dial serves the clock.” It is well known that among lovers, the eyes speak more than the tongue.

We must be vigilant over the eyes, for through them temptation and sin can enter, as happened to Eve, who was enchanted by the beauty of the forbidden fruit, or to David, who fixed his gaze on Uriah’s wife. In certain cases, one must proceed as one does with a bird of prey: to make it return, it is necessary to show it the lure; to calm it, one must cover it with a hood; similarly, to avoid bad looks, “one must turn the eyes away, cover them with the natural hood, and close them.”

Granted that visual images are largely dominant in the works of Francis de Sales, it must be recognised that auditory images are also quite noteworthy. This highlights the importance he attributed to hearing for both aesthetic and moral reasons. “A sublime melody listened to with great concentration” produces such a magical effect as to “enchant the ears.” But be careful not to exceed auditory capacities: music, however beautiful, if loud and too close, bothers us and offends the ear.

Besides, it must be known that “the heart and the ears converse with each other,” for it is through the ear that the heart “listens to the thoughts of others.” It is also through the ear that suspicious, insulting, lying, or malevolent words enter into the depths of the soul, from which one must be very careful. For souls are poisoned through the ear, just as the body is through the mouth. The honest woman

will cover her ears so as not to hear the voice of the enchanter who wants to cunningly seduce her. Remaining in the symbolic realm, Francis de Sales declares that the right ear is the organ through which we hear spiritual messages, good inspirations, and motions, while the left serves to hear worldly and vain discourses. To guard the heart, we must therefore protect the ears with great care.

The best service we can ask of the ears is to hear the word of God, the object of preaching, which requires attentive listeners eager to let it penetrate their hearts so that it may bear fruit. Philothea is invited to “let it drip” into the ear, first of one and then of the other, and to pray to God in the depths of her soul, that He may enjoy letting that holy dew penetrate the hearts of those who listen.

The other senses

Also, as regards the sense of smell, the abundance of olfactory images has been noted. The perfumes are as diverse as the fragrant substances, such as milk, wine, balm, oil, myrrh, incense, aromatic wood, spikenard, ointment, rose, onion, lily, violet, pansy, mandrake, cinnamon… It is even more astonishing to observe the results produced by the making of scented water:

Basil, rosemary, marjoram, hyssop, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, lemons, and musk, mixed together and crushed, do indeed give off a very pleasant fragrance from the mixture of their odours. However, it is not even comparable to that of the water distilled from them, in which the aromas of all these ingredients, isolated from their cores, blend more perfectly, giving rise to an exquisite fragrance that penetrates the sense of smell much more than would happen if the material parts were present along with the water.

There are numerous olfactory images drawn from the Song of Solomon, an oriental poem where perfumes occupy a prominent place and where one of the biblical verses most commented on by Francis de Sales is the heartfelt cry of the bride: “Draw me to you, we will walk and run together in the wake of your perfumes.” And how refined is this note: “The sweet fragrance of the rose is made more subtle by the proximity of the garlic planted near the rose bushes!”.

However, let us not confuse the sacred balm with the perfumes of this world. There is indeed a spiritual sense of smell, which we should cultivate in our interest. It allows us to perceive the spiritual presence of the beloved subject, and also ensures that we do not let ourselves be distracted by the bad odours of others. The model is the father who welcomes the prodigal son returning to him “semi-nude, dirty, filthy, and stinking of filth from long association with pigs.” Another

realistic image appears in reference to certain worldly criticisms. Let us not be surprised, Francis de Sales advises Giovanna di Chantal, it is necessary “that the little ointment we have seems stinking to the nostrils of the world.”

Regarding taste, certain observations by the bishop of Geneva might lead us to think that he was a born gourmand, indeed an educator of taste: “Who does not know that the sweetness of honey increasingly unites our sense of taste with a continuous progression of flavour, when, keeping it in the mouth for a long time instead of swallowing it immediately, its flavour penetrates more deeply into our sense of taste?” Granted the sweetness of honey, however, it is necessary to appreciate salt more, for the fact that it is more commonly used. In the name of sobriety and temperance, Francis de Sales recommended knowing how to renounce personal taste, eating what is “put before us.”

Finally, regarding touch, Francis de Sales speaks of it especially in a spiritual and mystical sense. Thus, he recommends touching Our Lord crucified: the head, the holy hands, the precious body, the heart. To the young man about to set sail into the vast sea of the world, he requires that he govern himself vigorously and to despise softness, bodily delights, and daintiness: “I would like you to sometimes treat your body harshly to make it experience some harshness and toughness, despising delicacies and things pleasant to the senses; for it is necessary that sometimes reason exercises its superiority and the authority it has to regulate sensual appetites.”

The body and spiritual life

The body is also called to participate in the spiritual life that is expressed primarily in prayer: “It is true, the essence of prayer is in the soul, but the voice, gestures, and other external signs, through which the innermost part of hearts is revealed, are noble appurtenances and very useful properties of prayer. They are effects and operations. The soul is not satisfied with praying if man does not pray in his entirety; it prays together with the eyes, the hands, the knees.”

He adds that “the soul prostrated before God easily makes the entire body bend over itself; it raises the eyes where it elevates the heart, lifts the hands there, from where it awaits help.” Francis de Sales also explains that “to pray in spirit and truth is to pray willingly and affectionately, without pretence or hypocrisy, and engaging the whole person, soul and body, so that what God has joined is not separated.” “The whole person must pray,” he repeats to the visiting sisters. But the best prayer is that of Philothea, when she decides to consecrate to God not only her soul, spirit, and heart, but also her “body with all its senses”. This is how she will truly love and serve Him with all her being.