 Reading time: 11 min.

St. Francis de Sales places the heart at the centre of human formation, as the seat of will, love, and freedom. Drawing from the biblical tradition and engaging with the philosophy and science of his time, the Bishop of Geneva identifies the will as the "master faculty" capable of governing passions and senses, while affections—especially love—fuel its inner dynamism. Salesian education therefore aims to transform desires, choices, and resolutions into a path of self-mastery, where gentleness and firmness come together to guide the whole person toward the good.

At the centre and pinnacle of the human person, Saint Francis de Sales places the heart, to the point that he says: "Whoever conquers the heart of a man conquers the whole man." In Salesian anthropology, one cannot help but notice the abundant use of the term and concept of the *heart*. This is even more surprising because among the humanists of the time, steeped in languages and thoughts drawn from antiquity, there does not seem to be a particular emphasis on this symbol.
On one hand, this phenomenon can be explained by the common, universal use of the noun "*heart*" to designate the inner self of a person, especially in reference to their sensitivity. On the other hand, Francis de Sales owes much to the biblical tradition, which considers the heart as the seat of the highest faculties of man, such as love, will, and intelligence.
To these considerations, one might perhaps add contemporary anatomical research concerning the *heart* and blood circulation. What is important for us is to clarify the meaning that Francis de Sales attributed to the heart, starting from his vision of the human person whose centre and apex are will, love, and freedom.

The Will, the Master Faculty

Alongside the faculties of the spirit, such as intellect and memory, we remain within the realm of knowing. Now it is time to delve into that of acting. As Saint Augustine and certain philosophers like Duns Scotus had already done, Francis de Sales assigns the first place to the will, probably under the influence of his Jesuit teachers. It is the will that must govern all the "powers" of the soul.
It is significant that the *Teotimo* begins with the chapter titled: "How, because of the beauty of human nature, God gave the will the governance of all the faculties of the soul." Quoting Saint Thomas, Francis de Sales affirms that man has "full power over every kind of accident and event" and that "the wise man, that is, the man who follows reason, will become the absolute master of the stars." Along with

intellect and memory, the will is “the third soldier of our spirit and the strongest of all, because nothing can overpower the free will of man; even God who created it does not want to force or violate it in any way.”
However, the will exercises its authority in very different ways, and the obedience due to it is considerably variable. Thus, some of our limbs, not hindered from moving, obey the will without problem. We open and close our mouths, move our tongues, hands, feet, eyes at our pleasure and as much as we want. The will exerts power over the functioning of the five senses, but it is an indirect power: to not see with the eyes, I must turn them away or close them; to practice abstinence, I must command the hands not to bring food to the mouth.
The will can and must dominate the sensitive appetite with its twelve passions. Although it tends to behave like “a rebellious, seditious, restless subject,” the will can and must sometimes dominate it, even at the cost of a long struggle. The will also has power over the higher faculties of the spirit, memory, intellect, and imagination, because it is the will that decides to apply the spirit to this or that object and to divert it from this or that thought; but it cannot regulate and make them obey without difficulty, since the imagination is extremely “changeable and fickle.”

But how does the will function? The answer is relatively easy if one refers to the Salesian model of meditation or mental prayer, with its three parts: “considerations,” “affections,” and “resolutions.” The first consist of reflecting and meditating on a good, a truth, a value. Such reflection normally produces affections, that is, strong desires to acquire and possess that good or value, and these affections are capable of “moving the will.” Finally, the will, once “moved,” produces the “resolutions.”

The “affections” that move the will

The will, being considered by Francis de Sales as an “appetite,” is an “affective faculty.” But it is a rational appetite, not a sensitive or sensual one. The appetite produces motions, and while those of the sensitive appetite are ordinarily called “passions,” those of the will are called “affections,” as they “*press*” or “*move*” the will. The author of the *Teotimo* also calls the former “passions of the body” and the latter “affections of the heart.” Moving from the sensitive realm to the rational one, the twelve passions of the soul transform into reasonable affections.

In the different meditation models proposed in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, the author invites Filotea, through a series of vivid and meaningful expressions, to

cultivate all forms of voluntary affections: *love* of the good (“turn one’s heart toward,” “become attached,” “embrace,” “cling,” “join,” “unite”); *hatred* of evil (“detest,” “break every bond,” “trample”); *desire* (“aspire,” “implore,” “invoke,” “beg”); *flight* (“despise,” “separate,” “distance,” “remove,” “abjure”); *hope* (“come on then! Oh my heart!”); *despair* (“oh! my unworthiness is great!”); *joy* (“rejoice,” “take pleasure”); *sadness* (“grieve,” “be confused,” “lower oneself,” “humble oneself”); *anger* (“reproach,” “push away,” “root out”); *fear* (“tremble,” “frighten the soul”); *courage* (“encourage,” “strengthen”); and finally *triumph* (“exalt,” “glorify”).

The Stoics, deniers of the passions—but wrongly—admitted the existence of these reasonable affections, which they called “*eupathies*” or good passions. They affirmed “that the wise man did not lust, but willed; that he did not feel joy, but gladness; that he was not subject to fear, but was prudent and cautious; therefore, he was driven only by reason and according to reason.”

Recognizing the role of affections in the decision-making process seems indispensable. It is significant that the meditation intended to culminate in resolutions reserves a central role for them. In certain cases, explains the author of the Filotea, one can almost omit or shorten the considerations, but the affections must never be missing because they are what motivate the resolutions. When a good affection arises, he wrote, “one must let it run free and not insist on following the method I have indicated,” because considerations are made only to excite the affection.

Love, the First and Principal “Affection”

For Saint Francis de Sales, love always appears first both in the list of passions and in that of affections. What is love? Jean-Pierre Camus asked his friend, the bishop of Geneva, who replied: “Love is the first passion of our sensitive appetite and the first affection of the rational one, which is the will; since our will is nothing other than the love of good, and love is willing the good.”

Love governs the other affections and enters the heart first: “Sadness, fear, hope, hatred, and the other affections of the soul do not enter the heart unless love drags them along.” Following Saint Augustine, for whom “to live is to love,” the author of the Teotimo explains that the other eleven affections that populate the human heart depend on love: “Love is the life of our heart […]. All our affections follow our love, and according to it *we desire, delight, hope and despair, fear, encourage ourselves, hate, flee, grieve, get angry, feel triumphant.”*

Curiously, the will has primarily a passive dimension, while love is the active power that moves and stirs. The will does not decide unless it is moved by a predominant

stimulus: love. Taking the example of iron attracted by a magnet, one must say that the will is the iron and love the magnet.

To illustrate the dynamism of love, the author of the *Teotimo* also uses the image of a tree. With botanical precision, he analyses the “five main parts” of love, which is “like a beautiful tree, whose root is the suitability of the will with the good, the stump is pleasure, the trunk is tension, the branches are the searches, attempts, and other efforts, but only the fruit is union and enjoyment.”

Love imposes itself even on the will. Such is the power of love that, for the one who loves, nothing is difficult, “for love nothing is impossible.” Love is as strong as death, repeats Francis de Sales with the *Song of Songs*; or rather, love is stronger than death. Upon reflection, man is worth only for love, and all human powers and faculties, especially the will, tend toward it: “God wants man only for the soul, and the soul only for the will, and the will only for love.”

To explain his thought, the author of the *Teotimo* resorts to the image of the relationship between man and woman, as it was codified and lived in his time. The young woman, from among the suitors can choose the one she likes best. But after marriage, she loses her freedom and, from mistress, becomes subject to the authority of her husband, remaining bound to the one she herself chose. Thus, the will, which has the choice of love, after embracing one, remains subject to it.

The struggle of the will for inner freedom

To will is to choose. As long as one is a child, one is still entirely dependent and incapable of choosing, but as one grows up, things soon change and choices become unavoidable. Children are neither good nor bad because they are not able to choose between good and evil. During childhood, they walk like those leaving a city and for a while go straight ahead; but after a while, they discover that the road splits in two directions; it is up to them to choose the right or left path at will, to go where they want.

Usually, choices are difficult because they require giving up one good for another. Typically, the choice must be made between what one feels and what one wants, because there is a great difference between feeling and consenting. The young man tempted by a “loose woman,” as Saint Jerome speaks of, had his imagination “exceedingly occupied by such a voluptuous presence,” but he overcame the trial with a pure act of superior will. The will, besieged on all sides and pushed to give its consent, resisted sensual passion.

Choice also arises in the face of other passions and affections: “Trample underfoot

your sensations, distrusts, fears, aversions," advises Francis de Sales to someone he guided, asking them to side with "inspiration and reason against instinct and aversion." Love uses the strength of the will to govern all faculties and all passions. It will be an "armed love," and such armed love will subdue our passions. This free will "resides in the highest and most spiritual part of the soul" and "depends on nothing but God and oneself; and when all other faculties of the soul are lost and subjected to the enemy, only it remains master of itself so as not to consent in any way."

However, choice is not only about the goal to be reached but also about the intention that governs the action. This is an aspect to which Francis de Sales is particularly sensitive because it touches on the quality of acting. Indeed, the pursued end gives meaning to the action. One can decide to perform an act for many reasons. Unlike animals, "man is so master of his human and reasonable actions as to perform them all for an end"; he can even change the natural end of an action by adding a secondary end, "as when, besides the intention to help the poor to whom alms are given, he adds the intention to oblige the indigent to do the same." Among pagans, intentions were rarely disinterested, and in us, intentions can be tainted "by pride, vanity, temporal interest, or some other bad motive." Sometimes "we pretend to want to be last and sit at the end of the table, but to pass with more honour to the head of the table."

"Let us then purify, Teotimo, while we can, all our intentions," asks the author of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Good intention "animates" the smallest actions and simple daily gestures. Indeed, "we reach perfection not by doing many things, but by doing them with a pure and perfect intention." One must not lose heart because "one can always correct one's intention, purify it, and improve it."

The fruit of the will is "resolutions"

After highlighting the passive character of the will, whose first property consists in being drawn toward the good presented by reason, it is appropriate to show its active aspect. Saint Francis de Sales attaches great importance to the distinction between affective will and effective will, as well as between affective love and effective love. Affective love resembles a father's love for the younger son, "a little charming child still a baby, very gentle," while the love shown to the elder son, "a grown man now, a good and noble soldier," is of another kind. "The latter is loved with effective love, while the little one is loved with affective love."

Similarly, speaking of the "steadfastness of the will," the bishop of Geneva states that one cannot be content with "sensible steadfastness"; an "effective steadfastness" located in the higher part of the spirit is necessary. The time comes

when one must no longer “speculate with reasoning,” but “harden the will.” “Whether our soul is sad or joyful, overwhelmed by sweetness or bitterness, at peace or disturbed, bright or dark, tempted or calm, full of pleasure or disgust, immersed in dryness or tenderness, burned by the sun or refreshed by dew,” it does not matter; a strong will is not easily diverted from its purposes. “Let us remain firm in our purposes, inflexible in our resolutions,” asks the author of *Filotea*. It is the master faculty on which the value of the person depends: “The whole world is worth less than one soul, and a soul is worth nothing without our good purposes.”

The noun “resolution” indicates a decision reached at the end of a process involving reasoning with its capacity to discern and the heart, understood as an affectivity moved by an attractive good. In the “authentic declaration” that the author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* invites *Filotea* to pronounce, it reads: “This is my will, my intention, and my decision, inviolable and irrevocable, a will that I confess and confirm without reservations or exceptions.” A meditation that does not lead to concrete acts would be useless.

In the ten *Meditations* proposed as a model in the first part of *Filotea*, we find frequent expressions such as: “I want,” “I no longer want,” “yes, I will follow inspirations and advice,” “I will do everything possible,” “I want to do this or that,” “I will make this or that effort,” “I will do this or that thing,” “I choose,” “I want to take part,” or “I want to take the required care.”

The will of Francis de Sales often assumes a passive aspect; here, however, it reveals all its extremely active dynamism. It is therefore not without reason that one has spoken of Salesian voluntarism.

Francis de Sales, educator of the human heart

Francis de Sales has been considered an “admirable educator of the will.” To say he was an admirable educator of the human heart means roughly the same thing but with the addition of an affective nuance, characteristic of the Salesian conception of the heart. As we have seen, he neglected no component of the human being: the body with its senses, the soul with its passions, the spirit with its faculties, particularly intellectual. But what matters most to him is the human heart, about which he wrote to a correspondent: “It is therefore necessary to cultivate with great care this beloved heart and spare nothing that can be useful to its happiness.” Now, the human heart is “restless,” according to Saint Augustine’s saying, because it is full of unfulfilled desires. It seems never to have “rest or tranquillity.” Francis de Sales then proposes an education of desires as well. A. Ravier also spoke of a “discernment or a politics of desire.” Indeed, the main enemy of the will “is the quantity of desires we have for this or that thing. In short, our will is so full of

demands and projects that very often it does nothing but waste time considering them one after another or even all together, instead of getting to work to realize the most useful one."

A good teacher knows that to lead his pupil toward the proposed goal, whether knowledge or virtue, it is essential to present a project that mobilizes his energies. Francis de Sales proves to be a master in the art of motivation, as he teaches his "daughter," Jeanne de Chantal, one of his favourite maxims: "One must do everything for love and nothing by force." In the *Teotimo*, he states that "joy opens the heart as sadness closes it." Love is indeed the life of the heart.

However, strength must not be lacking. To the young man about to "set sail on the vast sea of the world," the bishop of Geneva advised "a vigorous heart" and "a noble heart," capable of governing desires. Francis de Sales wants a sweet and peaceful heart, pure, indifferent, a "heart stripped of affections" incompatible with the vocation, a "right" heart, "relaxed and without any constraint." He does not like the "tenderness of heart" that amounts to self-seeking and instead requires "firmness of heart" in action. "To a strong heart, nothing is impossible," he writes to a lady, encouraging her not to abandon "the course of holy resolutions." He wants a "manly heart" and at the same time a heart "docile, malleable, and submissive, yielding to all that is permitted and ready to take on every commitment out of obedience and charity"; a "sweet heart toward others and humble before God," "nobly proud" and "perpetually humble," "sweet and peaceful."

Ultimately, the education of the will aims at full self-mastery, which Francis de Sales expresses through an image: to take the heart in hand, to possess the heart or soul. "The great joy of man, *Filotea*, is to possess his own soul; and the more patience becomes perfect, the more perfectly we possess our soul." This does not mean insensitivity, absence of passions or affections, but rather a striving for self-mastery. It is a path directed toward self-autonomy, guaranteed by the supremacy of the will, free and reasonable, but an autonomy governed by sovereign love.

Photo: Portrait of Saint Francis de Sales in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome. Oil painting by Roman artist Attilio Palombi, donated by Cardinal Lucido Maria Parocchi.